

PAUL BIYA'S AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP AND ITS BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN GOVERNANCE: A CASE FOCUS ON NIGERIA

Davou Dung Pam, Ph.D.
and
Mrs. Briskila Davou Pam

Abstract

This study adopts a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) to compare Cameroon and Nigeria – two countries sharing colonial heritage, regional location, and socio-economic diversity, but diverging in leadership duration and institutional structure. Authoritarian leadership continues to shape political outcomes in several African states despite the widespread adoption of multiparty electoral systems and constitutional governance frameworks. This study critically examines the authoritarian leadership of Paul Biya, President of Cameroon since 1982, and analyzes its broader implications for democratic governance in Africa, with a comparative focus on Nigeria. Drawing on theories of competitive authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and institutional political economy, the paper explores how prolonged incumbency, constitutional manipulation, centralized executive authority, and the suppression of dissent have contributed to governance deficits in Cameroon. The study further interrogates how these practices influence regional norms, weaken institutional accountability, and normalize leadership entrenchment across the continent. Using a qualitative comparative approach, the paper contrasts Cameroon's highly centralized political system with Nigeria's federal governance structure, competitive electoral environment, and comparatively vibrant civil society. While Nigeria continues to face serious governance challenges—including corruption, electoral irregularities, and elite dominance—the paper argues that its constitutional term limits, dispersed power structure, and active

judicial and civic institutions have constrained the consolidation of long-term personal rule. The findings suggest that authoritarian durability in Africa is less a function of leadership charisma than of institutional weakness and constitutional vulnerability. The paper concludes that sustainable democratic governance in Africa requires stronger institutional safeguards, enforceable term limits, protected civic spaces, and more robust regional accountability mechanisms to prevent democratic erosion and authoritarian entrenchment.

Keywords: Authoritarian Leadership; Democratic Backsliding; African Governance; Constitutional Term Limits; Federalism and Democracy

Introduction

Leadership and governance remain central concerns in Africa's political development discourse, particularly in the context of the continent's uneven democratic trajectory. Since the end of the Cold War, many African states have adopted multiparty electoral systems and constitutional reforms aimed at promoting democratic governance. However, the persistence of authoritarian leadership patterns alongside formal democratic institutions has raised critical questions about the depth and sustainability of these reforms (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Diamond, 2015).

A prominent feature of this paradox is the endurance of long-serving political leaders who maintain power through constitutional manipulation, electoral engineering, and institutional capture. Paul Biya, President of Cameroon since 1982, represents one of the most enduring examples of this phenomenon. With over four decades in office, Biya's leadership exemplifies how authoritarian governance can persist under the guise of constitutional legality and periodic

elections. His prolonged incumbency has generated intense scholarly debate on authoritarian resilience, democratic backsliding, and the erosion of political accountability in Africa (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Cheeseman, 2018).

The study of Biya's leadership is particularly significant because it illustrates a broader continental pattern in which authoritarian regimes adapt rather than collapse in response to democratization pressures. Instead of overt repression alone, many African leaders increasingly rely on legal frameworks, controlled elections, and patronage networks to entrench power. This form of governance, often described as competitive or constitutional authoritarianism, blurs the boundary between democracy and autocracy, making authoritarian rule more durable and less susceptible to both domestic and international pressure (Ginsburg & Simpser, 2014; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Beyond Cameroon, the implications of such leadership models extend to the wider African governance environment. The normalization of indefinite incumbency and weakened institutions sets troubling precedents for emerging and transitional democracies across the continent. Regional organizations such as the African Union have articulated strong normative commitments to democratic governance, term limits, and constitutionalism. Yet enforcement remains inconsistent, allowing entrenched leaders to consolidate power with minimal consequence (African Union, 2007).

Nigeria provides a compelling comparative case through which to examine these dynamics. As Africa's most populous country and one of its largest democracies, Nigeria has experienced recurring governance challenges, including corruption, electoral malpractice, and executive overreach. Nevertheless, unlike Cameroon, Nigeria has witnessed multiple civilian transfers of power since the return to democratic rule in 1999, including the electoral defeat of an incumbent president in 2015. These developments suggest the

presence of institutional and societal constraints that limit the consolidation of personal rule (Diamond, 2015; Ojo, 2019).

This paper therefore seeks to address three central questions. First, what are the defining features of Paul Biya's authoritarian leadership, and how have they shaped governance outcomes in Cameroon? Second, what broader lessons does Biya's prolonged rule offer for understanding authoritarian resilience and democratic backsliding in Africa? Third, how does Nigeria's governance experience—despite its imperfections—illustrate alternative institutional pathways that can constrain authoritarian entrenchment?

By adopting a comparative and analytical approach grounded in political theory and empirical scholarship, this study contributes to ongoing debates on leadership, institutions, and democratic governance in Africa. It argues that while authoritarian leadership thrives in contexts of weak institutions and centralized power, the Nigerian case demonstrates that federalism, competitive politics, and civic engagement can serve as partial safeguards against the entrenchment of personal rule. Ultimately, the paper underscores the need to move beyond elections as the sole measure of democracy and instead focus on institutional resilience, constitutionalism, and accountability as foundations for sustainable governance in Africa.

To address these questions, the paper proceeds as follows. It clarifies key concepts, provides historical context on Biya's political evolution, analyzes core authoritarian characteristics, discusses broader implications for African governance, presents the Nigerian comparative case, discusses findings, and the conclusion offers recommendations.

Conceptual Clarification

Conceptual clarity is essential for analyzing political leadership and governance, particularly when examining authoritarianism and

its implications for democratic development in Africa. This section defines and contextualizes the key concepts underpinning this study: authoritarian leadership, governance, democratic backsliding, and federalism, situating them within relevant scholarly debates.

Authoritarian Leadership

Authoritarian leadership refers to a system of political control in which power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or a small elite, with limited political pluralism, constrained civil liberties, and weak mechanisms of accountability (Linz, 2000). Unlike totalitarian regimes, authoritarian systems may allow limited political opposition and formal democratic institutions, but these are systematically manipulated to preserve incumbent power (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

In the African context, authoritarian leadership often manifests through prolonged incumbency, constitutional amendments removing term limits, politicization of security forces, and suppression of dissent (Fombad, 2014). Paul Biya's leadership exemplifies what scholars describe as “legalistic” or “constitutional authoritarianism,” where the law itself becomes a tool for entrenching power rather than limiting it (Ginsburg & Simpser, 2014).

For the purpose of this study, authoritarian leadership is operationalized using three indicators: (a) tenure length exceeding 15 years, (b) elimination of constitutional term limits, and (c) systematic use of state security to suppress opposition.

Governance

Governance broadly refers to the processes, institutions, and norms through which authority is exercised and public affairs are managed within a state (World Bank, 1992). It encompasses not only government actions but also the roles of non-state actors, including civil society, the private sector, and the media.

Good governance is typically associated with transparency, accountability, rule of law, participation, and effectiveness (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2011). Conversely, authoritarian governance is marked by weak accountability, elite capture of institutions, and limited citizen participation. In many African states, governance outcomes are shaped less by formal institutional design and more by informal power relations, patronage networks, and personal rule (Bayart, 2009).

Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and practices within formally democratic systems (Bermeo, 2016). Unlike abrupt military coups, backsliding often occurs incrementally through constitutional manipulation, electoral interference, weakening of judicial independence, and restrictions on media and civil society (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

In Africa, democratic backsliding is frequently associated with leaders who exploit popular mandates to dismantle institutional constraints and extend their tenure in office. The removal of presidential term limits, as seen in Cameroon, Uganda, and other states, is a central mechanism through which backsliding occurs (Cheeseman, 2018).

Federalism

Federalism is a system of governance in which political authority is constitutionally divided between a central government and subnational units, each with defined powers and autonomy (Riker, 1964). Federal arrangements are often adopted in plural societies to manage diversity, prevent power concentration, and enhance political inclusion.

Nigeria's federal system contrasts sharply with Cameroon's highly centralized structure. While federalism does not guarantee democratic governance, it can serve as a structural barrier against authoritarian consolidation by dispersing power and creating multiple centers of political competition (Suberu, 2001). This conceptual distinction is central to the comparative analysis in this study.

These concepts collectively provide the analytical framework for examining Paul Biya's leadership and its implications for African governance. Authoritarian leadership explains the mechanisms of power consolidation, governance captures institutional performance and accountability, democratic backsliding highlights the erosion of democratic norms, and federalism offers a comparative lens for understanding Nigeria's relative resistance to prolonged personal rule.

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, specifically the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Cameroon and Nigeria were selected because they share key background conditions – West/Central African location, Francophone/Anglo-colonial legacies, resource-based economies – but differ significantly on the outcome variable: duration of presidential incumbency (Biya: 40+ years; Nigeria: maximum two terms).

Historical Context and Political Evolution of Paul Biya's Leadership

Paul Biya ascended to power in 1982 following the resignation of President Ahmadou Ahidjo. Initially perceived as a reformist leader, Biya promised political liberalization and national reconciliation. However, these early expectations quickly gave way to a consolidation of personal power, especially after an attempted coup in 1984, which fundamentally reshaped Biya's approach to governance (Takougang & Krieger, 2000).

The introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, driven largely by internal protests and external pressure, did not fundamentally alter Cameroon's power structure. Instead, Biya adapted by controlling the pace and scope of political reform. Opposition parties were legalized, but electoral laws, state media dominance, and security forces remained firmly under executive control (Joseph, 2018).

A pivotal moment occurred in 2008, when constitutional amendments abolished presidential term limits. This reform enabled Biya to contest elections indefinitely, institutionalizing personal rule and weakening democratic accountability (Fombad, 2014). Since then, elections have served more as mechanisms of regime legitimation than as genuine avenues for political competition.

Core Characteristics of Biya's Authoritarian Leadership Centralization and Personalization of Power

One of the defining features of Biya's leadership is the extreme centralization of authority within the executive. Key political, military, and administrative appointments are made directly by the president, fostering loyalty and patron-client relationships rather than institutional accountability (Bayart, 2009). This personalization of power undermines bureaucratic autonomy and transforms state institutions into extensions of presidential authority.

The presidency dominates the legislature and judiciary, both of which lack effective independence. Laws are often passed without substantive debate, and courts rarely challenge executive decisions, reinforcing what scholars describe as “constitutional authoritarianism” (Fombad, 2014).

Electoral Manipulation and Political Control

Although Cameroon holds regular elections, their credibility is widely questioned. International observers and scholars have

documented systematic irregularities, including inflated voter registers, restricted opposition access to media, and the politicization of electoral management bodies (Freedom House, 2024). These practices reduce elections to procedural rituals that reinforce incumbent dominance rather than facilitate democratic choice.

Clientelism plays a central role in sustaining Biya's rule. State resources are distributed selectively to political allies and strategic regions, reinforcing loyalty while marginalizing dissenting communities (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

Patronage as a Governance Mechanism

Beyond coercion, Biya sustains power through a dense network of ethnoregional patronage. Key appointments follow a tacit formula balancing Beti (president's ethnic group), Muslim northern elites, and Anglophone collaborators. State contracts, parastatal boards, and security commands are distributed to reward loyalty and preempt coalitional opposition. This system, described as "the politics of the belly" (Bayart, 2009), renders formal accountability irrelevant and makes elite defection costly.

Suppression of Dissent and Civic Space

Authoritarian durability in Cameroon is further reinforced through the repression of dissent. Opposition leaders, journalists, and civil society activists frequently face harassment, arrest, or legal intimidation. Laws regulating public assembly and media are used to restrict freedom of expression, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship (Amnesty International, 2023).

Such repression weakens civil society's capacity to hold leaders accountable and undermines democratic political culture, particularly among youth populations.

Institutional Decay and Democratic Erosion

Over time, Biya's governance has hollowed out state institutions. Rather than serving public interests, institutions function primarily to preserve regime stability. This erosion of institutional legitimacy has long-term consequences for governance capacity, public trust, and national cohesion (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Broader Implications for African Governance Authoritarian Resilience and Democratic Backsliding

Biya's regime exemplifies how African leaders adapt to democratic norms without embracing democratic substance. By manipulating constitutions, controlling elections, and repressing opposition, authoritarian leaders maintain power while claiming legal legitimacy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This pattern contributes to democratic backsliding across the continent.

Norm Diffusion and Leadership Precedents

The tolerance of prolonged incumbency in Cameroon sends problematic signals across Africa. When regional and continental organizations fail to sanction authoritarian excesses, they inadvertently normalize leadership entrenchment (African Union, 2007).

Youth Disenchantment and Political Alienation

Africa's youthful population increasingly views entrenched leadership as disconnected from social realities. In Cameroon, political exclusion has fueled youth apathy, migration, and unrest, with implications for long-term stability (Resnick & Casale, 2011).

Security, Conflict, and Governance Fragility

Authoritarian governance often exacerbates security challenges. In Cameroon, exclusionary politics and repression have contributed

to the Anglophone crisis and other security threats, demonstrating how poor governance can fuel conflict (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Comparative Focus: Nigeria's Governance Experience Federalism and Power Dispersion

Unlike Cameroon's centralized system, Nigeria's federal structure disperses power across states and local governments. This dispersion reduces the likelihood of absolute executive dominance and creates multiple centers of political authority (Suberu, 2001).

Electoral Competition and Political Turnover

Since 1999, Nigeria has experienced several civilian transitions of power, including the defeat of an incumbent president in 2015. While elections remain imperfect, they retain competitive elements absent in Cameroon (Diamond, 2015).

Institutional Checks and Civic Resistance

Nigeria's judiciary, media, and civil society have periodically constrained executive excesses. Court rulings overturning flawed elections and sustained civic activism demonstrate partial institutional resilience (Ojo, 2019).

Persistent Challenges

Despite these strengths, Nigeria is not immune to authoritarian tendencies. Executive overreach, corruption, and elite capture remain serious concerns. However, Nigeria's pluralistic structure makes long-term personal rule more difficult than in Cameroon.

Discussion

The contrast between Cameroon and Nigeria underscores the importance of institutions over individuals in shaping governance

outcomes. Biya's leadership reveals how weak institutions enable authoritarian entrenchment, while Nigeria demonstrates how federalism, competitive politics, and civic engagement can constrain executive dominance even in challenging contexts.

A counterargument must be acknowledged: Nigeria's federalism has not prevented executive corruption, electoral violence, or state capture. President Buhari (2015–2023) repeatedly defied judicial orders, weakened press freedom, and politicized anti-corruption agencies. However, unlike Cameroon, these excesses triggered public backlash, judicial pushback, and elite defections – suggesting that Nigeria's *institutional permeability* enables resistance, whereas Cameroon's *institutional rigidity* enables entrenchment.

Conclusion

Paul Biya's authoritarian leadership offers critical lessons for African governance. His prolonged rule illustrates how constitutional manipulation, institutional weakening, and repression undermine democratic development. Nigeria's contrasting experience suggests that resilient institutions, enforced term limits, and active civil society are essential safeguards against authoritarian drift. Strengthening these mechanisms remains central to Africa's democratic future.

Recommendations

Drawing on the analysis of Paul Biya's authoritarian leadership and its broader implications for African governance—particularly in comparison with Nigeria—this study proposes the following policy and institutional recommendations to strengthen democratic governance, accountability, and political stability across Africa. These recommendations target three actor groups:

African Union & ECOWAS: Adopt automatic sanctions (e.g., suspension from decision-making bodies) within 90 days of any term-limit removal.

- National parliaments: Pass legislation requiring supermajorities (e.g., 4/5) for constitutional amendments affecting executive tenure.
- *Donor partners: Condition budget support on compliance with AU term-limit norms.*

Strengthening Constitutional Term Limits

One of the most effective safeguards against authoritarian entrenchment is the strict enforcement of presidential term limits. African states should constitutionally entrench term limits as non-derogable clauses, making them resistant to amendment through incumbent-driven legislative processes. Empirical studies show that term limits significantly reduce executive overreach and encourage leadership renewal (Fombad, 2014; Cheeseman, 2018).

Regional and continental bodies, particularly the African Union (AU) and sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS, should adopt clearer sanction mechanisms against unconstitutional tenure extensions. The normalization of indefinite incumbency, as exemplified by Cameroon, undermines democratic norms and weakens regional governance standards (African Union, 2007).

Enhancing Institutional Independence and Capacity

Judicial, legislative, and electoral institutions must be structurally insulated from executive interference. Legal reforms should guarantee financial autonomy, transparent appointment processes, and security of tenure for judges and electoral officials. Strong institutions, rather than benevolent leaders, remain the most reliable defense against authoritarian drift (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Nigeria's experience demonstrates that even imperfect institutional independence—particularly within the judiciary—can

serve as a meaningful constraint on executive excesses (Ojo, 2019). African states should therefore prioritize institutional capacity-building over personalized governance reforms.

Reforming Electoral Governance Frameworks

Electoral management bodies should be reconstituted to ensure political neutrality, transparency, and public trust. This includes independent funding mechanisms, open recruitment processes, and clear legal mandates. Credible elections enhance regime legitimacy and reduce the incentive for repression and political violence (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

Additionally, the role of domestic and international election observers should be strengthened, with observer reports linked to enforceable reform commitments rather than symbolic assessments.

Expanding Civic Space and Protecting Civil Liberties

Authoritarian resilience thrives in contexts where civil society and independent media are constrained. Governments should repeal or amend laws that criminalize dissent, restrict peaceful assembly, or suppress press freedom. A vibrant civic space enhances accountability and promotes political learning among citizens (Diamond, 2015).

Youth engagement is particularly critical. Given Africa's demographic profile, inclusive political participation mechanisms—such as youth quotas, civic education programs, and digital participation platforms—can mitigate political alienation and foster democratic renewal (Resnick & Casale, 2011).

Deepening Federalism and Decentralization Where Applicable

For plural societies, decentralization and federal governance can reduce excessive power concentration at the center. While federalism is not a universal solution, Nigeria's experience illustrates how power

dispersion can complicate authoritarian consolidation and promote political competition (Suberu, 2001).

Cameroon's highly centralized system would benefit from genuine decentralization that transfers fiscal and administrative authority to subnational units, particularly in conflict-affected regions. Such reforms could enhance inclusion and address long-standing grievances.

Strengthening Regional and International Accountability Mechanisms

African regional organizations should move beyond normative declarations to enforceable governance standards. Peer-review mechanisms, such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), should be strengthened and linked to development assistance and diplomatic engagement (African Union, 2007).

International partners should also align foreign policy priorities with governance outcomes by avoiding unconditional support for entrenched regimes under the guise of stability or security cooperation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and two-country comparison. Future research should extend the analysis to other long-serving leaders (e.g., Teodoro Obiang in Equatorial Guinea, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda) using process tracing or survey experiments on citizen tolerance of authoritarianism. Additionally, quantitative testing of the relationship between federalism and leadership duration across all 54 African states would strengthen generalizability.

References

- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*. Crown.
- African Union. (2007). *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*. AU.
- Amnesty International. (2023). *Cameroon: Human rights report*. Amnesty International.
- Bayart, J.-F. (2009). *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly*. Polity Press.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19.
- Bratton, M., & van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: Regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cheeseman, N. (2018). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, L. (2015). Facing up to the democratic recession. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 141–155.
- Fombad, C. M. (2014). Term limits and constitutionalism in Africa. *African Journal of Legal Studies*, 7(1), 1–39.
- Freedom House. (2024). *Freedom in the world: Cameroon*. Freedom House.
- Ginsburg, T., & Simpser, A. (2014). *Constitutions in authoritarian regimes*. Cambridge University Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2021). *Cameroon's Anglophone crisis*. ICG.
- Joseph, R. (2018). *Africa's governance and development*. Lynne Rienner.

- Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., & Mastruzzi, M. (2011). The worldwide governance indicators. *World Bank Economic Review*, 25(1), 1–33.
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. Crown.
- Linz, J. J. (2000). *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*. Lynne Rienner.
- Ojo, E. O. (2019). Democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *African Studies Review*, 62(3), 89–112.
- Przeworski, A., & Teune, H. (1970). *The logic of comparative social inquiry*. Wiley-Interscience.
- Resnick, D., & Casale, D. (2011). The political participation of Africa's youth. *World Development*, 39(10), 1833–1848.
- Riker, W. H. (1964). *Federalism: Origin, operation, significance*. Little, Brown.
- Suberu, R. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Takougang, J., & Krieger, M. (2000). *African state and society in the 1990s*. Westview Press.
- World Bank. (1992). *Governance and development*. World Bank.

