

Autocracies in transition: In 2025, Cameroon and Tanzania rulers clung to power — but look more vulnerable than ever

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Published: December 19, 2025 8:23am EDT



Protesters run as Cameroonian security forces use water cannons to disperse them during the country's latest election, whose integrity was widely challenged.

AP Photo/Welba Yamo Pascal

Autocratic leaders in Africa like their numbers to be in the high 90s, it appears.

In October, Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan won a highly dubious 98% of the presidential vote, perpetuating the ruling party's grip on power to 60 years. During the same month, Cameroonian President Paul Biya, who has ruled the country since 1982, secured an unprecedented eighth term in office. It will allow him to serve until he turns 99.

In neither case were elections deemed free or fair, and in both cases protests and severe government crackdowns followed.

Yet, while the outcome was ultimately the survival of incumbent governments, these elections are quite telling about the changing fortunes of autocracy in Africa.

In 2019, I wrote a book titled “How Autocrats Compete” that used Tanzania and Cameroon as contrasting examples. The divergent origins of their respective autocracies sowed the seeds for the kinds of challenges that each country would eventually face. Both country’s governments, which observers widely see as repressive and antidemocratic, have lost key sources of underlying strength, making them more vulnerable than they have been in decades.

The roots of 2 autocracies

“How Autocrats Compete” showed how Tanzania and Cameroon used to reflect two different strains of autocracy: party-based and a personalist.

For decades, Julius Nyerere was the driving force in Tanzanian politics. An immensely popular anti-colonial leader, Nyerere in 1965 created a single-party state governed by a robust and effective political party apparatus – first under the Tanganyika African National Union and later recast as Chama Cha Mapinduzi, or CCM.



Pedestrians walk past a billboard for Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan, of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party, who recently won reelection in an increasingly autocratic country.

AP Photo

The party attracted a wide swath of rural voters, had national functioning institutions and a widespread grassroots presence. Importantly, when Nyerere stepped down from power in 1985 – then a precedent in African politics – he established an internal primary system to select CCM’s future presidential candidates.

Cameroon's autocracy emerged from much different terrain. After independence, political power was heavily centralized in the presidency. The main source of power was the president's ability to use carrots and sticks to bring together a multiethnic coalition of elites into a transactional relationship.

By 1972, all political parties had been absorbed by the ruling Cameroonian National Union, later known as the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement.

The ruling party played a secondary role compared to the presidency, withering away and not even meeting for years. Under Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, power was oriented to the north of the country, while under Paul Biya it has been oriented to the south.

These different foundations for autocracy translated into unique adaptations to multiparty elections. In Tanzania, the ruling CCM could rely on widespread turnout, and the candidate selection processes appeared to minimize elite discontent within the party.



Supporters of the opposition presidential candidate protest on the streets of Garoua, Cameroon, on Oct. 26, 2025, during the country's latest – and disputed – presidential election.

AP Photo/Welba Yamo Pascal

Between 1995 and 2010, CCM and its presidential candidates could win determinative vote shares while minimizing costly repression and fraud.

Elections were still not free and fair, but there were not systematically high rates of violence or coercion. In fact, at the time many considered Tanzania somewhat of a democracy.

The same could not be said of Cameroon, where elections were initially much more challenging for the ruling party and President Biya.

In the 1990s, the ruling CPDM suffered a barrage of defections and Biya won only 40% of the 1992 election.

But, largely shielded from international scrutiny, he could deploy highly repressive tools that allowed him to build an image of invulnerability. Former opponents rejoined the CPDM, and the opposition wilted away to an enclave in majority Francophone Cameroon's English-speaking regions. At the core remained Biya, with virtual control over all political and economic life.

The erosion of hegemony in Tanzania

When I wrote "How Autocrats Compete," I argued that CCM's core strengths in Tanzania would ultimately erode. As younger generations became removed from the mythology of Nyerere, CCM's voting constituency would diminish.

And indeed, according to Afrobarometer, the percentage of Tanzanians who felt close to CCM declined from 91% in 2001 to 69% in 2012.

CCM's advantages as a ruling party also incentivized opposition parties to emulate it. There is extensive research on how the main Tanzanian opposition party Chadema mimicked CCM's grassroots approach to party building.

These changes were accompanied by increased factionalism within CCM. The key moment was the 2015 election when front-runner presidential candidate Edward Lowassa was disqualified and John Magufuli nominated instead. Magufuli, seen as an institutional choice, had no strong ties to any specific faction, and thus a tenuous grasp over the party elite.



People protest a day after the general election following allegations of electoral irregularities in Tanzania on Oct. 30, 2025.

AP Photo, File

The answer to all of these challenges has been for the ruling party to crack down on opposition and impose discipline. Since 2015, Tanzania has become a demonstrably less open place, ratcheting up the brutality against opposition elites and civil society writ large.

Meanwhile, to control its own elite, CCM has had to restrict its ability to maneuver. Despite promises of reform and conciliatory gestures, Hassan appears driven by the same political logic – the party cannot lose and can no longer rely on the tools of the past. The only way to secure victory is through much more overt repression.

The limits of personal rule in Cameroon

The personalized nature of the Cameroonian government has made the question of succession a perennial puzzle.

Absent any credible mechanism for choosing a successor, Biya's solution has been to kick the can down the road. In 2008, despite public discontent, he controversially removed term limits, seemingly signaling his willingness to stay in office indefinitely.

But Biya's ability to hold together the historic multiethnic coalition has appeared severely weakened in recent years.

Cameroon's English-speaking regions, representing nearly a quarter of the population, grew more vocal in their demands for equality in Cameroon's heavily centralized political system. The government's response has been violent, and since 2017 these regions have been mired in a civil conflict.

Biya has also faced growing opposition from the wing of his coalition representing the Bamileké, an important ethnic group that has largely remained within the ruling fold. Since 2012, when one of its leaders, Maurice Kamto, defected to challenge Biya, the government has routinely responded by arresting the opposition figure and many of his supporters.



Cameroon President Paul Biya casts his ballot in Yaounde, Cameroon, on Oct. 12, 2025.

AP Photo/Angel Ngueve, File

These factors, along with growing impatience over the question of succession, likely influenced the decision of the northern-based leader Issa Tchiroma to leave government and challenge Biya in the 2025 election. The north-south coalition had been the most important axis of Biya's coalition.

Given the size and importance of the northern bloc, overt repression of Tchiroma was much riskier for Biya. He could not simply disallow Tchiroma's candidacy as he had done for Maurice Kamto.

So Biya's government rigged the results.

To raise the costs of fraud, Tchiroma declared himself the winner immediately after the election. Cameroon's election management body took a painstaking 15 days to declare Biya the victor with just 54% of the vote, his lowest showing since 1992. Given the obvious factionalism and Biya's weakness, it would have been inconceivable to claim any larger of a victory.

The shifting tides of authoritarianism

While each election might have been a victory for autocracy, these are different autocracies from what they were 20 years ago. Importantly, the electoral contests tell us that authoritarian governments are dynamic – and even potentially at risk.

In the case of Tanzania, there has been a gradual unwinding of key sources of longevity in favor of more blatant and brutal tools of authoritarian rule. Hassan's vote share is a reminder of sham results seen in places like Equatorial Guinea or Rwanda.

On the other hand, in Cameroon we are witnessing the logical unfolding of a highly personalized autocracy that has been unwilling to deal with its own internal contradictions. In both 2025 and 1992, Biya faced a frayed political coalition that sensed his vulnerability. The difference this time is that Biya does not have another 30 years ahead of him to rebuild a political coalition.

At the end of the day, these are autocracies in transition and entering into a new status quo that seems much more fragile. It is unclear what new equilibriums will emerge.

Yonatan Morse does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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