

# **ROLL-BACK: DEMOCRATIZATION AND SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION IN CAMEROON\***

OBEN TIMOTHY MBUAGBO

&

ROBERT MBE AKOKO

*University of Buea, Cameroon*

## **ABSTRACT**

Cameroon's democratic train appears to be moving in the opposite direction following a brief spell of euphoria that heralded the re-introduction of political pluralism in 1990. What was believed by many observers to be a revolution that was going to usher in a system of governance on the foundation of Social Justice is petering out. Rather, the country is mired in generalized poverty, social discord, and a return to the political high-handedness characteristic of the post-independence monolithic political period. Several reasons, including efforts by anti-democratic forces to regain the political and economic privileges associated with autocratic rule, have been adduced for this policy roll-back. This paper uses a historical and analytic framework to discuss some reasons for this democratic hold-up in Cameroon's political and social transition within the broad and ongoing democratization process in Sub-Saharan Africa.

*Keywords: Cameroon, Democratization, Social, Fragmentation*

## **1. THE HISTORICAL FRAME**

An understanding of the ongoing democratization process in Cameroon must be linked to developments and various currents of world history which have profoundly shaped the political, economic, and social relations among diverse groups in this multicultural country. That the present socio-political organization and complexion of Cameroon derives from direct European imperial incursions, and the current global economic and political realignment are historical facts. At independence in 1960 the patchwork that is Cameroon had to evolve a distinct national identity which was expected to integrate these diverse realities within the framework of a modern state system. The challenge facing the new leadership that had replaced the colonial regime was that of building and consolidating a system of governance that would attract the acceptance and willing participation of all relevant stakeholders in the emerging political

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landscape. Multiculturalism became the principal leitmotif of the postcolonial regimen preoccupation with the perceived dangers of instability that could stem from a variety of centrifugal forces which were yet to identify with the Cameroon nation supra the ethnic and regional loyalties. In this context, and in order to preserve the multicultural character of a state that was the creation of colonialism, the arguments for national unity will resonate through the immediate post-independence political history of the country, to the extent of shaping its political and economic outlook. The historical slip to autocratic rule that began in 1966, and the neopatrimonial governance regimes that this entailed can partly be explained by the rationalization of this quest for national integration as a necessary first step in the construction of a modern and viable Cameroon on the basis of its cultural diversity. The theme of national unity, and the various methods of achieving it defined the main political orientation and actions of the immediate post-independence period (Ngoh 1996).

As in many African states in the 1960s, the post-independence heroism that the new leadership enjoyed will quickly build up to a myth, and favour the emergence of personality cult expressed in various nationalist chants – the most common being father-of-the-nation, that is, the identification of the state with its founding president. In Cameroon, Amadou Ahidjo's powers were greatly increased, captured by Schatzberg's 'father and family' metaphor. This personalization of rule that began in the 1960s, has remained a pervasive force in the politics of many states in Africa (Schatzberg, 1986, 1991; Mbuagbo, 2002; Mbembe, 1992).

The political history of Cameroon witnessed a new twist in 1982 following the voluntary retirement of Amadou Ahidjo after two decades of imperial rule, and the peaceful transition to his constitutional successor, Paul Biya. The new president marked his entry with a new political creed defined by promises of rigour, moralization, and the democratization of all aspects of national life. These policies were going to be sanctioned, he promised, by zero tolerance on corruption, with emphasis on probity in the management of state affairs. These ideals were eloquently expressed in his book, the 'Communal Liberalism' (1987). The euphoria which greeted Biya's accession to power was indeed great. Hopes were that Cameroon was to be transformed almost immediately by a determined leadership. However, this euphoria that gripped many Cameroonians who saw in the new leader a liberator from years of dictatorship was not going to last for more than a decade; following the gradual, but steady decline in the country's economic performance. A combination of reasons, including internal economic mismanagement, and shocks in the international financial and trade systems explains this economic decline in Cameroon (Jua, 1991; Konings, 1996).

In a bid to reverse this negative economic trend, the government embraced the Structural Adjustment Program prescribed by the Bretton Woods institutions as alternative development paradigms to the state-centred approach, which it now declared outmoded and unrealistic (Tanga et al., 2002). This new approach entailed the withdrawal of the state as a major player in the economy, the

introduction of neo-liberal economic principles that placed an emphasis on market forces as the engine for growth and development. It also required that the state democratize by opening the political space to accommodate contradictory political discourses on nation building, and also the inclusion of civil society as an integral and active agent in the restructuring process. It was widely believed by World Bank policy makers that civil society could be the alternative route to Africa's development dilemma and, therefore, its inclusion in the prescribed exercise became an important benchmark for continued economic assistance from the World Bank and other bilateral and multilateral aid donors.

To what extent and how fruitful have these political and economic measures imposed from without been on the lives of millions of Cameroonians? How involved has the civil society been in the making of a 'new' Cameroon? This paper examines the complex relationship between the state and society in the evolving political and economic landscape and reasons for the present hold-up to Cameroon's transition exercise to a more inclusive and people-oriented governance. While focusing on Cameroon, broad comparison will be drawn from similar experiences in other countries south of the Sahara to enable us place Cameroon within the broad sweep of Africa and world history.

## 2. THE POLITICAL FUNGI

The genesis of Cameroon's inability to evolve a viable, inclusive and participatory governance structure lies in its long history of romance with autocratic rule, both in its administrative practices and political decisions. These have been perfected by the state through the adoption of several political stratagems, variously called divide-and-rule, neopatrimonialism, the politics of the belly, pre-bendalism, patronage, clientelism – all of which have led to the informalization of politics (Bayart, 1993; Schatzberg, 1986; Clapham, 1991; Gordon, 1996; Konings, 1997; Ndue, 1999; Nyamnjoh, 1999; Mbuagbo, 2002). Above and beyond these political facts is the existence of a constitutional arrangement, which is more or less a truncation of the historical realities of modern Cameroon because these arrangements fail to consult all the relevant stakeholders. For example, the imposition of political unity in the midst of considerable social, cultural, and linguistic pluralism in the name of national integration and national unity would eventually result in autocratic rule in the 1960s and 1970s (Joseph, 1978; Mbaku, 2002).

The purported swing to a democratic governance structure in 1990 has gone only as far as the political ritual of holding elections, all of which have been marred by gross irregularities and blatant disregard of the fundamental principles of democratic electioneering (Nyamnjoh, 2002). The change of regime in 1982 was not followed by a radical departure from the policies and practices of the previous regime, since the incumbent has resorted to 'preventive strategies' in stalling change towards any meaningful democratic governance.

The propensity by government to bend over backwards by resorting to repressive measures to contain opposition political movements and dissenters is a preventive strategy (Ake, 2000; Mbaku, 2002). The incumbent has consistently relied on divide-and-rule tactics to monopolize the country's political space, as opposition political parties and other potential agents of civil society have been splintered. In this context the possibility of internal social and political forces to coalesce and provide a viable alternative to the present system of governance, which is founded on constitution without constitutionalism, is still a remote prospect (Mbuagbo et al., 2003). The government's success in splitting the opposition National Union for Democracy and Progress Party (NUDP) in 1992 when two of that party's high-ranking officials accepted cabinet-level positions in the government of the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) is symptomatic of this politics (Akoko and Mbuagbo, forthcoming).

In pursuance of these anti-democratic practices which exclude the vast majority of citizens from the political process, elites at both the national and regional levels now seek to control the state, particularly its distributive networks in order to sustain primitive accumulation. What this implies is the privatization and subversion of state institutions in total disregard of the rational-cum-legal Weberian principles which by definition underpin modern state systems. The state and its institutions are yet to be institutionalized, for they have failed to crystallize into a rational organ *sui generis*, above and beyond partisan and particularistic political objectives. It is this failure that has become the object of exploitation and profiteering to political elites at all levels, who can conveniently feed on the state's already overstretched and thin resources in the absence of an effective sanctions mechanisms (Chabal and Daloz, 1999).

It has been argued elsewhere that the foundation of the modern state in Africa was linked to the commercial exploitation of colonies. In order to attain this profitable objective, African colonial and postcolonial states were built on coercive principles designed to control rather than to inculcate new habits that accompany the management of modern states. So the state in Africa was not only an arbitrary creation, but its operational rubrics were equally arbitrary and far from the Weberian ideal. As such, the state in Africa has always represented the remnants of a hegemonic project (Mbembe, 1992). In this context, how far have the present transition policies gone in bringing about changes in the methods of management of the state in Cameroon? What, if any, are the main differences between the postcolonial state and its antecedent, the colonial state? Empirical evidence strongly suggest that Cameroon remains a neocolonial and neopatrimonial state in which the distribution of patronage in the form of appointments to strategic positions in the government, administration and state corporations are determined by the degree of political loyalty demonstrated by individuals and groups (Mbuagbo, 2002; Akoko and Mbuagbo, forthcoming).

On this score, the state is built on a reticulated network of personal loyalties which spreads in every direction (Bayart's rhizome metaphor), horizontally and

vertically to link various patrons and sub-patrons and their clients to the informal distributive network. For instrumental reasons, the business of politics is conducted informally, outside the official political realm, since there is little meaningful institutionalization (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). The notions of public good and transparency in the management of state affairs are obviated by narrow particularistic and communitarian codes of conduct as the state has been reduced to a null category. Kofele – Kale (1986) points out that this patronage system for distributing political power in Cameroon according to ethnic groups led to the establishment of ‘several tiers of ethnic barons’ down the political hierarchy. These rewards – both material and symbolic – transcend established legal and administrative procedures and, instead, ethnic or regional channels are used. Rule becomes arbitrary and the tendency to resort to repressive strategies and techniques against political opponents is drastically increased. The hallmark of these political strategies include the weakening of the state, which is today identified by aid donors as the chief impediment to economic growth due in part to the sheer bureaucratic weight, corruption, and inefficiency that characterize its *modus operandi* (The Post, 1997; The Post, No. 0205, 2000, the Post No. 0223, 2000; The Post No. 0483, 2003, Pastoral Letter on corruption 1987/1989).

How could such a state be expected to effectively implement the various reform packages designed by the World Bank, the IMF and other aid donors? Or are these ‘reforms’ only designed to serve as a smokescreen to mask the deleterious impact of the forces of world capitalist forces which operate in tandem with their local hirelings? That the latter suggestion is most likely the case is illustrated by the failure of adjustment policies to produce the intended results on Cameroonians.

### 3. THE ELUSIVE AGENDA

The failure of the state in Cameroon, and Africa to provide and guarantee the basic social, economic and political wherewithal of citizens led some to think that Africa’s economic and political predicaments could be solved through the empowerment of civil society. The civil society-centred approach was floated by the World Bank and other aid donors who viewed it as one way of disciplining inefficient and corrupt states, and forcing through a participatory governance option on the basis of democracy and transparency. In other words, the state was discredited as an agent of development and today, the civil society perspective runs the entire gamut of development thinking in Africa. The hard question is whether civil society in its current ragged form represents a way forward in Cameroon’s quest for economic and political advancement. Even harder is the question whether civil society as generally conceived in the literature on democracy and development really exists in Cameroon (Orkin, 1995; Myers, 1997; Deutschland, 2003; Abdelrahman, 2000).

These questions are dovetailed with Gifford (1997), who argues that civil society was quickly and speedily expunged from the political scene in Cameroon by the autocratic postcolonial regime of President Ahmadou Ahidjo, who made it virtually impossible for forces beyond those of the state to emerge. For example, he forced all opposition groupings into his own party, the Union National Camerounaise (UNC) in 1966, and his successor Paul Biya has come up with the politically ambitious but degenerative ‘majorité Présidentielle’, equally designed to forestall any alternative political discourse on the future of Cameroon. This latter strategy, like the former one, consist in co-opting some members of opposition political parties into the reins of power and so destroy them in the process. The case of the UNDP mentioned earlier is illustrative.

If by civil society is meant ‘organised interest’, with a significant degree of autonomy from the state, yet acting as a ‘watchdog’ on state institutions, then its location and role in the present political process in Cameroon is hard to pinpoint (Abdelrahman, 2000, Matovu, 2002). This is partially due to the ‘structural and fundamental’ problems of democratization – the historically located disjuncture between state and society and between the political class and ordinary citizens (Osaghae, 1999). This historical disjuncture, which began with the repressive colonial regimes in Cameroon, and continued with its successor postcolonial governments, explains the inability of civil society to make an impact on the political scene. Because this was never achieved in Cameroon’s immediate post independence political evolution, a civil society is now struggling to emerge, this time not in the form of federated interest groups meant to defend certain social and political ideals, but as forces and a focus for ethnic and communal rivalries, and as objects of infra-state mobilization (Gemandze, 2002). Riven by deep cleavages and tensions, it is a threat to the democratic process itself. It has given strong arguments to conservative anti-democratic forces to reinvoke the old argument that plural democracy could unleash violence and lead to the disintegration of Cameroon, (Ake, 2000). Konings (2002) shows how political liberalization in Cameroon exposed dormant feelings of animosity between ‘allochthones’ and ‘autochthones’ during students’ revolts in 1990–1996. Like many other issues of national interest, the student movements soon assumed the ugly character of regionalism in terms of supporters and opponents of the regime. In Yaounde, and other regions of the country, pro-government vigilant groups emerged for various political reasons to counter what they saw as the unholy alliance between the minority Anglophones and the Bamilike ethnic group to rob the ruling clique and their supporters of their political privileges.

Similarly, the uncontrolled and almost anarchic creation of local NGOs, which are meant to serve as agents, not only for the distribution of western aid, but also to funnel such aid to private bank accounts, is indicative of the fact that civil society is a misapplied model. Most remain narrow in scope and familial in character. A cursory observation of NGO activities in Cameroon reveals that many operate in ‘suitcases’, and function only on ad hoc basis (that is, when funds are made available) because they lack rudimentary administrative structures and personnel to enable them function. The case of the Royal Women

Development Council (RWDC) in Buea, which has neither an office nor personnel, is a common feature of many NGOs in Cameroon. The proliferation of these NGOs does not necessarily coincide with the ideals of civil society, just as political pluralism is not necessarily synonymous with democracy. The experience in Cameroon demonstrates this assertion. The World Bank conditionality for economic assistance to the country – political pluralism accompanied by good governance, economic liberalization, and the inclusion of civil society have not produced the magic wand of prosperity which these policies were designed to achieve. The admission of Cameroon into the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative speaks volumes (Tamba, 2001).

It is argued here that a strong Eurocentric and unilinear perspective still marks this idealization of civil society as a development agent in Cameroon. Like many other development-oriented concepts, this perspective is not warranted by historical and actual evidence. Mamdani (1995) says the sphere of civil society is public rather than private, it is coterminous with the state, rather than antagonistic. As part of the failure to contextualize the study of social realities in Africa, Mamdani argues that we are faced with the problem of uplifting social phenomena out of context and process and imposing explanations not derived from empirical observations of actual social processes, but by analogy from antecedent but different historical occurrences. At present, the concept of civil society can best serve as a heuristic device for research on the possibilities for a Cameroon and Africa – focus democracy and civil society. Current approaches represent the so-called neoliberal (in its political and economic variants) explanations of social realities that have neocolonial undertones. This is what Richard Joseph (1978) describes as an ideological façade designed to mask a thorough empirical and theoretical explanation of Africa's social realities.

#### 4. PERSPECTIVES ON A POSTCOLONY

The current democratic experience in Cameroon has failed to unleash the productive forces of society, as citizens are entrapped in an economic and political uncertainty never before known. State-society relations increasingly operate at variance for they have not been anchored in a viable governance structure. Existing institutional arrangements are as arbitrary now as they have always been because they fail to accommodate the plural character of the country. An assessment of the outcome of democratization in Cameroon against the backdrop of the initial optimism and wave of enthusiasm that greeted the process is at best disappointing (CAMNET, 2000). Garreton's processal and paradigmatic explanation of the process of democratization from the phase of transition to the phase of consolidation has simply not occurred in Cameroon as successive political events have demonstrated (Garreton (1995) In: Osaghae, 1999; Nyamnjoh, 2002).

This situation has occasioned a retreat by citizens from the state to the community or primary groups through the creation of local self-help groups and so-called NGOs to cater for local and immediate concerns. The state is more and more anachronistic and irrelevant because of its inability to provide the basic welfare requirements of Cameroonians. Attention has been diverted from the state as the main purveyor of economic welfare to others, more parochial and informal structures. Alternative bases of loyalty have emerged and the use of ethnic identity and the politics of exclusion are increasingly responsible for the current social fragmentation in Cameroon (Awasom, 2001). Retreat from the state is both implicit and explicit: the laissez-faire attitude of civil servants, corruption, dereliction of duties at all levels and departments. Announcements on the national radio and its local affiliates requesting state employees, who for no apparent reason have failed to report to their pos, are very frequent. Beyond and above these is the growth of anti-hegemonic discourses by various social forces to counter the state's inability to provide concrete answers to the economic and social plight of citizens. There is little evidence that the Structural Adjustment Program is succeeding in spite of the governments much trumpeted claim (The Post, 2003). On the contrary, it has only added to the erosion of the legitimacy of the state, and the absence of overarching bonds with the state has only strengthened local loyalties. Falling real wages and social insecurity in the economic and political sphere have exposed the weaknesses of the current reforms. It can be argued that the clamour for change in Cameroon, as in most Sub Saharan African countries should be understood in the context of the economic failures registered, rather than to the will of the people to democratize, because behind this democratic effervescence lies their legitimate aspirations for economic improvement. To the extent that many governments in Africa were able, in the 1960s and 1970s, to keep their populations in check was due partly to the economic stability and positive growth rate, which were recorded, not because of any imaginary democratic governance pursued. The present emergence of restive social groups has an economic message, and the answer to these problems should begin by providing realistic solutions to these economic concerns.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The exogenous origins of ongoing efforts at 'creating' a democratic social order in Cameroon similar to the colonial one have revealed the limits of imported development models. This thinking, driven as it were by neoliberal economic and political doctrines, has seen the introduction of a new development perspective with the rolling back of the state and the promotion of civil society as a prime mover of economic development and democratic practice (World Bank, 2000). This perspective is, however, dubious and ideologically laden and built on assumptions which do not reflect actual social and historical processes.



The imposition of SAP has not brought the expected improvement in the organization and functioning of the state, nor in living conditions, so much as contriving to subordinate the state and its population to the dictates of world capitalist forces. As Chomsky (1991) points out, the assigned role of Africa in this world economic (dis)order is restricted to 'policing their working class and superfluous population, while transnational corporations gain free access to their resources'. Frank (1991) repudiates free marketeering, economic liberalization and electoral political democracy as dubious development models, pointing out that the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) near economic miracle was heavily dependent on national state intervention. The irony in the current strategy in Cameroon and Africa lies in attempting to roll-back the state for reasons which have no historical justification. Mills (1959) describes this mode of thought as essentially bureaucratic because it is not connected to the 'basic idea of historical social structure', that is, the association and dissociation of concepts without reference to their historical context.

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**About the authors:** The authors of this article are Lecturers in Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Buea, Cameroon.