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Democratization and multipartism in Cameroon: challenges and prospects

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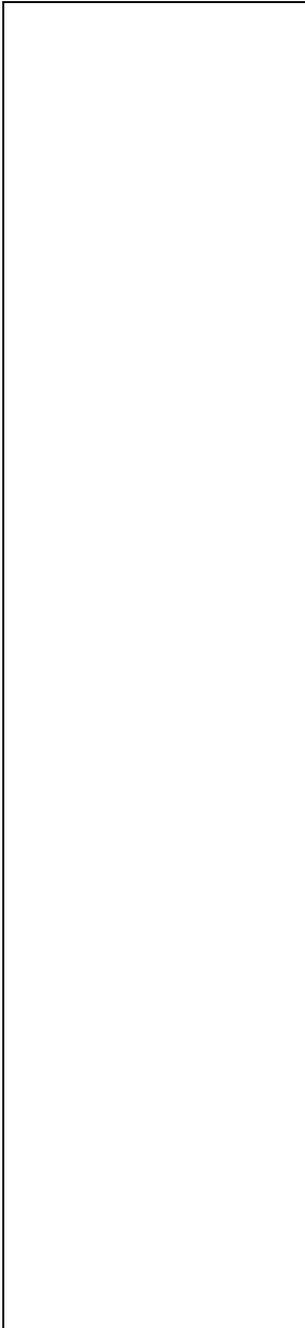
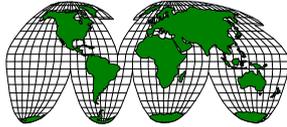
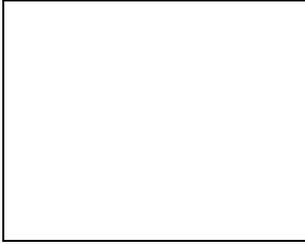
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Democratization and Multipar-
tism in Cameroon:
Challenges and Prospects

Beiträge

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Introduction^{*}

At independence in 1960, the then Cameroon Republic experienced the first wave of democratic expression defined in terms of multipartism. The same phenomenon was manifested in what was then the Southern Cameroons. With the advent of a Federal constitution in 1961 developed the Federation of Cameroon whose body politic continued to be characterized by democratic experimentation in the shape of multipartism. By 1966, the Federation opted for a different form of political process defined in terms of the One-Party form of politics in line with the desire to accelerate nation building, rapid economic development and national unity.¹ The year 1966 thus saw the end of the first wave of democratic politics and the beginning of a new and, at the time, most popular form of politics in the Developing World - the Single Mass Party model of politics.

For some, the Single Mass Party form of politics was not only in line with African traditions, it was the most desirable to enable the achievement of rapid economic development and national unity. The rationale being that it would harness all the national energies instead of engaging in dispersed and often conflict-prone pluralistic forms of political expression.

For others, this model of politics was democratic within the context of Africa whose traditions were consensual rather than competitive and conflictual.² In the case of Cameroon, the rationalization that nation-building and national unity would be enhanced seemed quite an attractive case given the fragmented nature of her pre-independence history. It is also noteworthy to recall that during the pre-1966 Single Party era, the political landscape was characterized by a civil war that involved the government on the one hand and the mainly UPC opposition which had been banned prior to independence on the other.³

From 1966 when the Single Mass Party form of politics came into being until 1982 with the advent of the Biya administration, the Cameroonian body politic was characterized by and functioned on a Monolithic logic whose central hallmarks were: the absence of competing political parties and other freely formed associations, the absence of multiple candidate elections

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¹ J.K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, Oxford University Press, Dar-es-Salaam, 1966.

² For further discussions of One Party systems, see William Tordoff, *Government and Politics in Africa*, Macmillan Press, Hong Kong, 1984.

³ Richard Joseph, *Radical Nationalism in Cameroon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977.

for public office, the limitation of fundamental political and civil liberties, the lack of emphasis on the protection and promotion of human rights, the concentration and centralization of political decisionmaking powers and the omnipresence of the Party over State organs. In effect, Monolithism was in some respects the very anti-thesis of the previous democratic process that was characteristic of the pre-1966 body politic. For some observers, this model of politics gave the young nation an „even chance of someday becoming the one Cameroon nation“.⁴ Yet for others, this model of politics permitted the country to harness the necessary energies to enable it to achieve a moderate degree of economic development.⁵ This record notwithstanding, the national body politic remained essentially monolithic with its attendant limitations in terms of political expression and individual freedoms.

For some political commentators, the political process was undemocratic to the extent that it lacked the central hallmarks of a democratic system of politics and government.⁶ What is not subject to dispute is that the Monolithic character of the political process denied the process a chance to experiment with competing logics and rationalizations. It also denied the political process the chance to test the extent of disapproval. Finally, Monolithism burdened the political process with a passive rather than an active creative spirit as centralization engendered over dependency on the center to the detriment of external creative energies. Moreover, the limitations of Monolithism shut legal avenues for the dawn of democratic expression in terms of the existence of basic human freedoms.

With the advent of the New Deal administration in 1982, the nation seemed relieved of a burden. A commentator described the moment in these terms:⁷

The new regime of President Biya has dramatically reversed the trend and given the future of the private press a new hope (...) Cameroonians now breathe a new air of freedom which they never had for more than twenty years of Ahidjo rule.

⁴ Willard Johnson, *The Cameroon Federation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1970.

⁵ See U.S. Department of Commerce, *Country Reports*, US Department of Commerce, Washington D.C. (annual).

⁶ Richard Joseph, op.cit.

⁷ J.F. Gwellem, *Paul Biya: Hero of the New Deal*, Gwellem Publications, Limbe, 1984.

1 The Democratic Process under the New Deal

As proposed in the initial declarations of his administration, liberalization and democratization were to be the hallmarks of the New Deal program of government. To the successor President himself, liberalization involved the restoration of public freedoms, in particular, freedom of thought and speech. Democratization meant the introduction of pluralism into national political life. This process included elections based on free choice and multiple candidacies.⁸ The question that has to be asked is „What made this second wave of democratic politics different from the pre-1966 first wave, or was there no difference? What factors engendered this second wave? What are the dimensions of the process? What are the problems? What are the future prospects?“ These are the questions that form the thrust of the rest of this paper.

The first and second waves of democratic politics in Cameroon were different in at least three respects. While the first was fragmentary in terms of the federation, the second was cohesive and national in character. In the first wave, the political parties were regional parties whereas in the second wave, the political parties are to a large extent national parties. In the first wave, there were three constitutions at play; in the second wave there is only one single constitution. In the first wave, the form of the State was a Federation whereas in the second wave, the form of State is a Unitary Republic. What is, however, common to both waves is the existence of competing freely formed political parties engaging in pluralistic debate and electoral competition with a multiplicity of candidates.

This common denominator of the democratic process in the two eras fits well into the democratic concept as defined in democratic theory. The essential quality being that it is a process based on the rule of law, elected representative government, civil rights, majority rule, protection of minorities, separation of powers and popular sovereignty. In such a process, the elected government is responsive to the people and the people possess the liberty to make a choice. In terms of the structure and composition of the government in an atmosphere of civility and order.⁹ In this context, multipartism denotes the existence and functioning of a multiplicity of political parties all competing for public office on the basis of freedom of choice and within formal rules of law.

⁸ See *The New Deal Message: Speeches and Interviews of President Paul Biya*, Editions Sopecam, Yaounde, 1989.

⁹ C.B. McPherson, *Democratic Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1973.

2 The Dynamics of the Post-1982 Process

The post-1982 democratic process proceeded along two wave lengths or speeds. The first wave length or speed involved preparing the then single ruling party for multiparty competition. This phase involved introducing multiple candidacies within the party in elections for local party officials as early as 1983. The phase also involved reorganizing and transforming the CNU into the CPDM as a way of emphasizing the democratic resolve of the New Deal. In this first phase of the process, the minds of militants and party barons were also stimulated to prepare for competition with other parties. This phase lasted till 1990 when the law on multipartism was passed by the National Assembly opening up the political landscape to a multitude of freely formed political parties and associations all vying for political expression and public office. In the second phase, multipartism took shape and on occasion, it seemed unmanageable. This phase also marked the proliferation of the private media which violently took on the government and the ruling party in its commentaries. These activities were coupled with sometimes violent social movements all claiming to express their freedom of speech and expression. These movements nearly rendered the entire national life dysfunctional but for the intervention of forces of law and order and appeals from wise politicians of political parties that saw no value in political radicalism.

After over a year of radical political expression, three major developments have marked this phase of the process, (1) Legislative elections of March 1992, (2) Presidential elections of October 1992, and (3) the 1991 November Tripartite meeting. These events were all characterized by multiparty participation culminating in the formation of the current Coalition Government and Multiparty National Assembly. With the ongoing constitutional talks also alive, there seems to be ample evidence to suggest that this second phase of the post-1982 process would result in an outcome that would make multipartism a permanent and vital feature of the democratic process in Cameroon.

3 Problems Associated with Multipartism

Multipartism as an element of the democratic process has generally tended to be associated with tensions, conflicts, blocages and sometimes violence on the part of some actors and political parties. This is more frequent in those societies in which democratic tradition has not yet taken root in terms of tolerance, civility, courtesy, rationalization of choices of candidates and issues. It is also more frequent where socio-economic conditions do not exist adequately

to sustain free discussion and tolerance. Such conditions include economic problems, low literacy, poor infrastructure, low rate of urbanization etc. Problems that have been associated with multipartism as a form of democratic expression in Cameroon have reflected this general developing country pattern:

Other problems that are related to the former category are the tendency to have parochial, regionally-based or tribal parties, the tendency to violate the law out of ignorance or out of passion, the tendency to vote without due rationalization of issues or candidates, the tendency to engage in vote rigging and intimidation tactics, the tendency to deny respect for other parties and the tendency to refuse electoral outcomes that are unfavorable. This is true for Cameroon as has been the case elsewhere.

Another important problem that has characterized multipartism in Cameroon and most of the Third World is the confusion that has often been manifested by parties of the opposition in terms of their role in the democratic process and their objectives as political actors. As the Cameroonian experience has shown, the party or parties that have not succeeded to be part of the majority coalition or the majority party have tended to function as if they were equal to the party or parties in power in terms of their role in the political process. They have also limited their objective to the sole goal of attaining a position of power. Not only has this tendency hurt some parties in the democratic process, they have denied themselves the opportunity to engage in other activities for which political parties play a vital role.

These activities include: educating the electorate on burning issues, raising and shaping issues in an attempt to mould public opinion positively, serving as a moderating influence on the political process and preparing for future electoral contests. As the Cameroonian experience has shown, the tendency for some parties has been to refuse results and claim that nothing of consequence took place. For some political parties, their awareness of the role of the political party in the democratic process seems quite high and for these, the prospects seem good that they will contribute enormously to the sustainability of not only multipartism but also of the democratic process.

4 What Future for Multipartism?

All indications are that multipartism will remain a permanent feature of the democratic process in Cameroon and elsewhere. However, the extent to which multipartism will contribute effectively to the democratic process depends upon a certain number of factors:

1. Political parties need to learn to adapt themselves in terms of organization, methods, and goals;
2. Political parties need not to neglect the other vital functions of political parties which are to educate the public and serve as moderating influences on the process;
3. Political parties need to avoid turning party leaders into semi-Gods that are infallible;
4. Political parties need to inculcate in their behavior patterns a culture of civility, etiquette, tolerance, and courtesy;
5. Political parties need to see one another as being complementary rather than adversarial actors even if their programs are competing with one another;
6. Political parties need to learn to work with governing parties where possible instead of engaging in a permanent state of demagoguery;
7. Political parties need to function and be organized on the logic of private enterprise with defined strategies, methods, and goals, and finally
8. Political parties need to see a government as an institution with attributes that are only those of a government.

Under these conditions, multipartism stands the best chance of contributing enormously to the development of democracy and to their own chances of attaining positions of power through democratic elections.