Democratic change and foreign policy in Africa: the case of Cameroon

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Introduction

An American scholar once remarked,

as it enters its third decade of independence, Africa faces a troubled future. Its troubles are directly related to the growing pains associated with attempts to establish polities, economies and societies under a second and third generation of leadership. The third decade is a time for diplomacy with all the art and skill that the calling can carry.¹

This description of African politics in the early 1980's remains as relevant today and even more relevant in the 1990's as the continent begins her fourth decade of independence. In the last few years, as the continent has struggled to grapple with what many observers have described as the "lost decade"² in economic terms, there has emerged a popular cry in many African states for democratization of political life. These anxieties have been partly fueled by the poor performances that have characterized most African economies in the last decade coupled with the realization by many that the political experiments of the last thirty years have not been so successful in inducing sustainable economic development.

In Cameroon, the current wind of democratic change sweeping across the nation was initiated in 1982 with the coming into power of the Administration of President Paul Biya - when he declared in his earlier speeches to the nation his commitment to a democratic political platform - known by its catch-phrase - The New Deal. This commitment is best illustrated in the President's New Year message of December 1983 when he declared,

New rays of hope sprang from the depths of the nation on the morrow of 6 November, 1982. As I have said, they called for a greater liberalization and democratization of the Cameroonian society. I have therefore led the country on to the difficult, certainly, but salubrious path of openness, an openness which I am hoping will be, and should be conscious, tolerant and constructive, which should be carried out in an orderly and responsible manner...

I am firmly determined to continue on this path of openness within the framework of our laws and regulations and with due respect for the fundamental interests of the nation: liberalization as concerns public freedoms, in particular, freedom of thought and of speech, a factor of creativity through the development and discussion of ideas, of fulfillment through participation...

By realistically introducing pluralism into our political life, it means that from now on, the leaders and representatives of the State and of the Party, at all levels, will be freely elected from among several candidates by citizens or militants. This will be the case for future council, parliamentary and Presidential elections.  

Since the early days of the administration, the progress towards such a democratic political path has not been so far from the above prescriptions, however slow some observers may regard such progress. Empirical evidence certainly suggests that the commitment of the Biya administration to a democratic political system continues to stand the test of time and has created a situation that in classical political science language would be termed a syndrome of "rising expectations". The latest, most definitive and clearest definition of the Administration's democratic ethos, was revealed during the last National Congress of the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement when the President asked his party and the nation to prepare for a more advanced stage of democratic development which would include eventual competition. 

Since this latest declaration, the process of democratization has taken on a new momentum, with all forms of political expression and organizations in progress as if to suggest to the administration the need not only to speed up the pace of its democratization program but also to consider the achievements so far as irreversible.

Obviously, a lot seems to be at stake for the nation at large in terms of the shape, the speed, and the paradoxes inherent in democracy. What is to be borne in mind is however, not how democratic the political process is becoming or has become. Rather, the inescapable concern for Cameroonians should be the extent to which a democratic political path would induce a more sustainable economic development and at the same time a more united and stable nation. 

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4 See *First Congress of the CPDM*, Yaounde, June 28-30, 1990
5 This view is founded in the World Bank recommendations for Africa. For an exhaustive analysis, see Timothy M. Shaw, *Which Way for Africa? ECA and IBRD responses to the Continental Crisis*, SIAS, Uppsala, 1982.
set of concerns that is as crucial and central to our national well-being, is what are the consequences of these democratic changes on our external behavior? What do these changes mean for our relations with the external world? How are these changes to be viewed by the external environment? What kinds of external reactions would contribute in not only establishing a democratic Cameroonian polity but also one that would stand the test of time?

It is this second set of questions that this essay focuses on. Furthermore, it is the task of this essay to postulate on the implications of the current domestic political changes in Cameroon and on future relations with the external environment. The central thesis of the paper is that Cameroon's attitudes, actions, and images in the international environment are likely to be affected by the political changes currently taking place in both content, process and direction to the extent that if well managed by the Biya administration the democratization experiment has the potential of more effectively achieving our foreign policy objectives thereby better serving our national interests in a more predictable manner.

1 The Domestic Political Dynamics of Foreign Policy Making in Cameroon

The literature on foreign policy is loaded with both empirical and theoretical suggestions of the correlation between domestic determinants and the external behavior of states.⁶ Seen from any perspective whether traditional/realist or radical/political economy, foreign policy behavior is generally viewed as the external expression of a state's domestic concerns. To this extent, the domestic variant of a state's behavior is as much a determinant of such a state's external behavior as is the external environment itself. This classical linkage thesis in foreign policy is amply evident in the corpus of knowledge, generally regarded as foreign policy literature⁷. The central idea that permeats the available literature on foreign policy is simply that what a state does in the external environment is as much, if not very much a function of what it does at home as what prevails in the very external environment to which policy is intended to address itself.

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⁶ Classical views of this approach include the works of James Roseneau, (ed.) *Linkage Politics*, Free Press, New York, 1969; *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, Free Press, New York, 1967

⁷ Rosenau, op.cit.
In the case of Cameroon, attempts by foreign policy scholars to demonstrate this linkage thesis have been borne out amply\textsuperscript{8} to the extent that the current political changes begun since 1982 represent further evidence to suggest changes in the process, content and direction of our future foreign policy. Since its attainment of sovereign status, Cameroon's foreign policy has been largely determined or shaped by a variety of factors central to which are its domestic structure including its national economy, its national resource base, its governmental structure, its political leadership. To these domestic determinants are added factors such as the country's network of alliances, its colonial heritage, its size and its location.\textsuperscript{9} From the limited studies that have so far been conducted, it is clear that foreign policy making since independence has been the prerogative of the Cameroonian chief executive - the President of the Republic\textsuperscript{10} who is not only the Head of State but also the Head of government. In the classical conceptualization of foreign policy, this pattern of its making is not without foundation and its logic. As Wallace points out, for almost all intents and purposes, the State acts for the society internationally and governments make policy in the name of the State under external, domestic, institutional, and other pressures... However, in all states, to a greater or lesser degree, foreign policy emerges out of an institutional process and in most cases, it is extremely rare for foreign policy decisions to be the responsibility of a single individual or a small group. The need for information, interpretation, and advice, and the necessity for coordinating policies between different areas and different ministries involve a large number of men and agencies in the evolution of policy. Foreign policy is therefore made within an organizational context consisting of many agencies.\textsuperscript{11}

The salient question that arises is to what extent and in what ways the process of democratization is likely to affect this pattern of foreign policy making in Cameroon. From all that has been achieved so far in the direction of democratization, taken together with the continuing efforts on the part of the Administration to give greater meaning and speed to the experiment, there is little


\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in Kofele-Kale, op.cit.
doubt as to the shape politics has taken since 1982 and the shape it is about to take as the nation enters its fourth decade of independence. So far, among the several innovations in the direction of democratization have been greater freedom of expression both written and verbal, greater freedom of economic enterprise, greater freedom of travel and communication, greater freedom of choice in the recruitment of political leaders within the ruling party, greater concern for the protection of human rights and other civil liberties, and a clearer and more definitive commitment to an advanced form of democracy including eventual competition among more than one political associations.

To many, these achievements in political democratization are indicative of the need for a more rigorous, morally upright political leadership that is both responsive and responsible to public demand. To others, these achievements are an index of the political vision of a new generation of African political leadership committed to a more open political process geared towards inducing more efficient state management and more sustained economic development. Whatever these changes may signify, what is not questionable is the fact that the current democratic political changes in Cameroon invoke one of the most essential ingredients of democratic theory - freedom: Freedom to choose, freedom to express, freedom to change, freedom to travel and communicate, freedom to associate - in essence, freedom to be. The extent to which these freedoms are exercised at the domestic level would not only dictate our future action externally but would determine the manner in which we deal with such an external environment. In the extreme, even the underlying principles and objectives of the nation's foreign policy stand to be affected in fundamental ways.
2 Principles, Objectives and Direction of Foreign Policy in Cameroon

Since attaining sovereign independence, Cameroon has opted for a foreign policy that has been described variously as status quo, conservative, pragmatic, cautious, non-confrontational, capitalist, pro-West, and moderate.¹² These characterizations of our external behavior since independence are for the most part reflective of not only the principles that both the first and current generation of political leadership endorsed as the philosophical foundation of our foreign policy, they are also indices of our desire to achieve certain objectives in our interactions with the external environment. The extent to which these principles and objectives have been upheld has been largely a function of the domestic situation which under the current political atmosphere is ripening in terms of our ability to attain the maximum of our foreign policy objectives.

Essentially, these principles which include international cooperation, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, Pan Africanism, non-alignment, anti-colonialism/imperialism and respect for the territorial integrity of states were coined at independence with a view to enabling the young state to better articulate its position and define its place vis-a-vis others in the international system.¹³ These principles were also coined as a reflection of our colonial heritage and legacy which endowed us with certain national attributes that would be determinant in our capacity and ability to achieve the foreign policy objectives set for ourselves at independence. These objectives, which also happen to be the foreign policy goals characteristic of most African foreign policies in general, include the consolidation of national independence, the achievement of sustained economic development, decolonization, African unity, international peace and security, the achievement of national political stability, and the attainment of international respectability.¹⁴

The natural question that has been the subject of some scholarly attention is in what ways and to what extent have these foreign policy objectives been achieved in the last three decades of African independence? It suffices to argue that an objective response to this question would largely

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¹² Ibid., pp 197-217
¹³ Delancey, op.cit.
¹⁴ Kofele-Kale, op.cit.
depend upon the particular analytical perspective adopted. What much of African foreign policy literature suggests is that radical/political economy/neo-Marxist scholarship tends to dismiss African foreign policy as having achieved little or nothing\textsuperscript{15} while traditional/Realist/Orthodox scholars have tended to be more liberal in their interpretation of African foreign policy performance, however limited these performances maybe.\textsuperscript{16}

Regardless of the perspective one adopts, there is strong empirical evidence that supports the view that as limited as African foreign policy performances might be, a lot has been achieved in the thirty years since independence given the circumstances of the international environment since then. It would be difficult for any analysis to quarrel with the fact that African states have achieved a measure of international respectability, a measure of unity, a measure of respect for their national integrity, a measure of economic development, and a general maturation in their foreign policy experiences. This experience notwithstanding, the record leaves much to be desired about not only its consequences but also its future.

The direction and achievements of Cameroon's foreign policy are largely reflective of this general African pattern. Being fundamentally of a status quo\textsuperscript{17} type, the best description that can be attributed to our foreign policy for much of the last thirty years is one of change in continuity. Essentially, our foreign policy record in three decades of independence reveals a discernible pattern of conservatism and caution in our external comportment. We have tended to emphasize and commit ourselves to our colonial heritage, our historical relationships, our regional affinities, our national development options which are essentially of a free enterprise or capitalist nature, our respect for international norms and institutions, our relations with all actors who demonstrate a will and a capacity to contribute to our national development. More particularly, we have placed special emphasis on and commitment to former colonial powers and relationships. It suffices to state that within this pattern of continuity, we have also attempted to break new grounds such as opening up new avenues of interaction and exchange with non-traditional actors.

\textsuperscript{15} For this radical literature, see Timothy M. Shaw and Olajide Aluko, The Political Economy of African Foreign Policy, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1984.


\textsuperscript{17} Kofele-Kale, op.cit.; Oyono, op.cit.
such as Japan, the Soviet Union, China, Korea, and Brazil; and a propensity to constantly want to review our relationships with traditional partners with a view to achieving greater equilibrium and perhaps greater room for maneuver in our international relationships. Mark Delancey captures this trend in this commentary:

> It is decolonization that seems best to describe the history of Cameroon's foreign relations given the gradual diversification of partners most easily observable in the economic and commercial areas. Even though this freedom of choice has been limited within the Western capitalist bloc mainly due to its national economy which has a capitalist base.18

Obviously, this pattern of foreign policy has had its appeal and continues to describe our foreign policy performance in the last thirty years. The question that arises is in what ways and to what extent are the democratic changes taking place in the country likely to change this pattern of external behavior.

### 3 Foreign Policy Implications of Democratic Political Change in Cameroon

As noted in an earlier essay, the current efforts at democratization of political life are fraught with both challenges and promises19, one of which is in the foreign policy area. Even though, foreign policy activity is in general kept out of the reach of much of the debate and conflict that characterizes domestic politics, the influences of the latter on the former are not to be taken lightly, partly as a function of the paradoxes inherent in a democratic political process such as is in the making in Cameroon. If by extension one postulates that a democratic political system necessarily engenders an appeal for a democratically based kind of foreign policy, it is possible to predict ways in which and the extent to which our foreign policy is likely to be affected by the changes currently taking place in our domestic political structure. Viewed generally as a foreign policy conducted with ample citizen input or in full view of the public, democratic foreign policy

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18 Delancey, op.cit. p.216; also I. William Zartman, Europe and Africa: Decolonization and Dependency, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 1976, Vol. 54, No. 1, p.326

making is necessarily open, subject to public debate and opinion; and tends to eclipse the autonomy and power of the state to act vigorously and decisively in terms of its national interests.\(^{20}\) If this conception of foreign policy is operationalized in the context of the changes currently taking place in the political system, greater pressures are likely to be brought to bear on the autonomy of the executive to formulate and execute such policy, the consequences of which could range from changes in the style and content of our foreign policy to changes in its direction if not effectiveness.

These domestic political pressures inherent in democratic politics seem worthy of comment given the emphasis of this essay. Among the several foreign policy consequences of democratic politics is the management factor. By its very definition, foreign policy is an issue area of national relevance. It is an issue area for which all political systems require a policy machinery, the making and management of which are the responsibility usually of the state as represented by its government. In the classical conception of democratic politics, the making and management of national policy are the responsibility of not only the state but also of the other groups represented and organized in the form of civil society. These groups tend to play an essential role in both the formulation and management aspects of national policy by educating, manipulating, influencing, articulating, and opposing certain aspects of policy making and implementation. One of the consequences of this state of democratic politics is and tends to be a limitation on the autonomy of the executive to formulate and implement policy given the preoccupation with containing the often conflictual representations and tactics of groups in civil society.

A related consequence on policy formulation is the time element. Time is of essence in policy formulation and implementation and the extent to which time is utilized and managed dictates the effectiveness of policy. Given the conflictual and the heated character of democratic representation in the policy process, time is at times the victim rather than the resource a situation which does not often engender an achievement of the objectives of policy. This state of affairs has led to the view that democratic approaches to foreign policy are more time consuming and

less cohesive than totalitarian approaches in terms of making, execution and effectiveness.\(^{21}\) The social context of politics in Cameroon is particularly prone to this scenario given its characteristics of diversity in ethnic terms, its limited historical experience in democratic policy formulation and practice, its tendency for nepotic orientation, its limited capacity for policy issue comprehension, and its susceptibility to sophisticated forms of manipulation.

The question of style is yet another consequence of democratic politics on the foreign policy process. Traditionally, the foreign policy process involves the development of a cluster of orientations in terms of commitment to and actions designed to achieve certain advantages for the nation-state. The manner in which these are undertaken depend largely on the type of domestic political process. From empirical knowledge, it generally obtains that while democratic politics tend to adopt more open and more dispersed forms of foreign policy style, authoritarian/totalitarian and other less democratic politics tend to opt for greater centralization and secrecy in style.

In much of her thirty years foreign policy history, Africa in general and Cameroon in particular have been characterized as having a foreign policy that is essentially less open to public scrutiny and more centralized and personalized in style.\(^{22}\) Since the advent of the new administration of President Biya and the introduction of his democratic ideals into the political process, this traditional policy style has begun to give way to a more open and less personalized form of policy making. These innovations in style are evident in the extent to which the President seems to have given his ministers and other high government officials occasion to participate in international forums which are traditionally reserved for Heads of State. This change in style is also evident in frequency with which the government has tended to issue media declarations and policy positions all intended for public appreciation and debate.\(^{23}\) In the eventual emergence of competitive party politics, this open and more liberal style is likely to become all the more the norm given the limitations imposed by debate and other forms of public controversy on policy issues, policy formulation, and policy execution.

\(^{21}\) Olson, op.cit.
\(^{22}\) Mbu Etonga, op.cit.; Kofele-Kale op.cit.
\(^{23}\) The 1990's public debate in the press surrounding whether or not Cameroon should be admitted into the Commonwealth is a vivid example of the new style of foreign policy making.
Policy consistency or continuity is also of consequence in foreign policy making and execution. By its very conception and given its historical practice, foreign policy is an enterprise one of whose essential characteristics or virtues is consistency or continuity in both orientation and commitment. Given this fundamental ingredient of the enterprise, the consistency or continuity factor is regarded as an essential factor for the effectiveness of the foreign policy of any state. In her thirty years of sovereign independence, this salient feature of foreign policy has been characteristic of Cameroon's external behavior and seems to explain not only our foreign policy in terms of its substance but also its direction.

For us, continuity has meant giving priority and attention to our traditional partners, the foreign investors, the multinational corporations, multilateral organizations, regional concerns, and sub-regional affinities. Continuity has also meant for us consistency in our developmental ideology and model, the essential ingredients of which rest on the assumptions of cooperation, foreign aid, foreign investments, and foreign trade without reservation as to ideological frontiers. Continuity has also meant for us a foreign policy of pragmatism in the face of an international system characterized by struggles for influence, hegemony, and exploitation.

In a scenario of political pluralism such as is being introduced by the Biya administration in the political process, this feature of our foreign policy stands to be affected fundamentally in several ways depending upon who is doing what when and how in such a political process. Party organization naturally tends to be known for its ability to develop policy positions all couched in a political platform or manifesto. It also tends to breed its own candidates for recruitment into policy making positions. In the context of a democratic political process of a pluralist nature whereby these organizations become operational, the tendency is a shift from emphasis on consistency to emphasis on change, and this phenomenon applies to such aspects of foreign policy as the making, the substance and the direction. In the Cameroonian case, the implications of such a scenario are not only serious but they call into question the need to conduct our democratic experi-
ment in a more cautious and tactful manner in order to give our foreign policy the benefit of hindsight and possible shock.24

Related to the question of consistency is the element of predictability, yet another essential ingredient in foreign policy making practice. Conceived as a policy intended for and susceptible to the external environment, foreign policy practice often requires that the actor is viewed as predictable in his judgement and commitment. A state's actions in the international arena needs to benefit from this peer appreciation without which a misperception by other actors in the international system risks calling into question the state's very legitimacy and the overall effectiveness of its policy vis-a-vis the international system. African states in general and Cameroon in particular, are in no position to escape this tendency given their national attributes which limit their foreign policy choices. States such as Cameroon are thus necessarily limited in their policy choices to consider consistency as a factor for the success of their foreign policies in that such consistency permits them to understand, to learn, and to develop the capacity to achieve their foreign policy objectives without necessarily having to undergo the pain of change in either the substance or direction of foreign policy. However, a consequence of democratic and pluralistic domestic politics is often the tendency for various domestic political actors in their capacity as organized civil groups, to appeal for substantive changes in the direction of traditional policy even if the state's capacity to effect such changes successfully is limited as is the case with Cameroon.

This state of affairs also generates another foreign policy consequence of domestic structure - the concern for effectiveness. Conceived as a policy designed to obtain certain advantages out of the international environment for domestic consumption, the question of effectiveness is of fundamental concern not only to foreign policy analysts but to policy makers as well. In what way can a foreign policy be described as being effective? How can it be made effective? How can its effectiveness be increased? Generally, an objective measure of the effectiveness of a state's foreign policy is the extent to which its objectives or goals have been met over time and not at a particular time point. While the difficulty with this measure of foreign policy effectiveness rests gener-

24 Various political parties particularly in the opposition are increasingly of the view that foreign policy should be more open to public debate and scrutiny.
ally with quantifying what goal or set of goals have been achieved, the essential requirement always remains that the core objectives or goals of foreign policy which include national survival, economic development and international respectability or legitimacy be sustained over time.

Over the thirty years of her foreign policy experience, most analyses would give some African states and Cameroon in particular, the benefit of the doubt in terms or their achievement of the core objectives of foreign policy. While economic development is experiencing a crisis throughout the continent, countries such as Cameroon have prided themselves with having managed their economies relatively better than most others in the region to the extend that Cameroon’s foreign policy over the years has succeeded in attracting not only much foreign capital investment but also easy access to credit and grants from the external environment. However, a consequence of changes in the structure of domestic politics brought about by the exigencies of democratic fervor, this demonstrated capacity for and ability to achieve these core objectives of foreign policy are likely to be challenged by an often heated, and emotionally charged public in competition and conflict with itself over policy formulation and execution. However, if the process of democratic change is well undertaken and understood, it is also likely to engender greater effectiveness over the longer term in the formulation and execution of policy.

Also of relevance in foreign policy is the element of respectability or legitimacy of position. One of the intangible goals of any foreign policy actor is the search for or the maintenance of international respectability or legitimacy and most African states began their foreign policy experiences in need of much of these elements. These twin elements of foreign policy were in short supply at the dawn of independence given the lack of a history of foreign policy making prior to independence. Over the thirty years of foreign policy experience, most African states have had to consider the attainment of international respectability or legitimacy as one of the prime goals of foreign policy. In this respect, much of the commentary would be unhesitant to give them a plus. Inspite of the handicaps that have characterized their foreign policies, African states have succeeded in getting the international system to understand and react to their needs to a degree which makes their position on major world issues a factor to be reckoned with in international politics. Their mere weight of numbers has also given added weight and legitimacy to their foreign policy positions.
However, the extent to which they are able to sustain this international legitimacy would depend partly upon their ability to manage and organize their domestic environments particularly in political and economic terms. Political stability is an objective that has eluded post-independence Africa for much of her history, and under a scenario such as is being played in states such as Cameroon, there is reason to caution that efforts at democratization of domestic politics should not be allowed to eclipse the much needed foreign policy goal of international respectability or legitimacy. Cameroon is particularly in a much favorable position to reconcile her effort at democratization with the goal of international respectability given her history of political stability, economic progress, and new political leadership. The extent to which she is able to manage this situation remains one of the challenges of not only her efforts at democratization of domestic politics but also one of the challenges of her future foreign policy.

4 The Future of Cameroon's Foreign Policy

From empirical knowledge about African foreign policy behavior, there is reason to expect that Cameroon's future foreign policy would continue to be characterized by both continuity and change. Continuity in content and direction; continuity in terms of principles and objectives. However, given the changing domestic political scene in the direction of greater democratization, the changes that are likely to occur would be rather those of style, intensity, degree of emphasis, scope and degree of understanding and management of the issues. The current administration of President Biya has not only hinted at these changes already, it has committed itself to bringing them about while preserving the traditional aspects of the country's foreign policy. Since the advent of the administration in 1982, and while maintaining that Cameroon's foreign policy vis-a-vis our traditional partners would be preserved intact, the administration has nonetheless sought to alert the world as to its vision of the world and Cameroon's place in it. Notable among the elements of this new foreign policy vision are the broadening of the scope and intensity of diplomatic activity, which has seen a renewal of diplomatic relations with Israel, and the opening up of diplomatic links with Brazil, Japan, and Czechoslovakia, the warming up to then

West Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and Nigeria, and greater involvement in sub-regional affairs particularly the UDEAC grouping.

Also notable among these changes is the new foreign policy style. There has been greater tendency on the part of the administration to involve Government Ministers and other officials in the foreign policy process. The Foreign Minister, the Finance Minister, the Trade and Industry Minister, the Planning Minister, and even the Head of the Economic and Social Council, have all seen greater involvement on their part in the foreign policy making and execution process. Another foreign policy innovation has been the openness to transnational bodies and multilateral financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund and French financial institutions, all of which have limited themselves to the economic aspects of their relations with Cameroon. These innovations, however modest they may be, suggest not only indications of our future foreign policy but also demonstrate that the new foreign policy is likely to be influenced largely by one dominant ideology - the ideology of development. And, given the changing domestic political environment, the prospects seem to be good that the pace and scope of these foreign policy innovations would accelerate.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this essay, we have attempted to demonstrate the classic argument that the conceptual linkage between domestic structure and external politics is relevant in Cameroon's foreign policy as is with any state's foreign policy. In demonstrating the argument, we have not only placed our analysis within the framework of the principles and objectives that characterize the foreign policy of the State, we have argued that the current efforts at democratic political change are fraught with foreign policy consequences amongst which are the management of policy, the style of policy formulation, our international credibility, our effectiveness, predictability, and consitency. Given these consequences, we have further established that the future of our foreign policy will reflect changes in style, in scope, degree of emphasis, degree of understanding and mastery of the foreign policy phenomenon while maintaining the continuity pattern with traditional actors in the external environment.