

**THE SEARCH FOR A CAMEROONIAN MODEL OF
DEMOCRACY OR THE SEARCH FOR THE DOMINATION
OF THE STATE PARTY: 1966-2006**

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The search for a Cameroonian model of democracy or the search for the domination of the state party

1996 and 2006 were two milestones in the political history of Cameroon. They represent, respectively, the establishment of a one-party system in the country and the parliament's passing of bill that created an independent body to organize country's elections. The road followed by Cameroon, when compared to those of most African countries, notably Niger and Benin, seems to be different in regards to what political framework was chosen. Analyzing discourse from Cameroonian newspapers in comparison with similar events in Benin and Niger, the article shows that since 1966 the country's rulers have laboured to create a 'Cameroonian exception' to its method of governance, with the eventual aim of having a Cameroonian model of democracy. In reality, the hidden aim has been to perpetuate the domination of the state party in the political landscape of the country.

Keywords: Cameroon, Benin, Niger, Cameroonian model of democracy, state party, multiparty system

A procura de um modelo de democracia camaronês ou a procura da dominação do partido-Estado

1966 e 2006 constituem dois marcos da história política dos Camarões. Representam, respectivamente, o estabelecimento de um sistema de partido único e a passagem no parlamento de um projeto de lei que criou o órgão independente para organizar as eleições do país. O caminho seguido pelos Camarões, em termos das escolhas dos figurinos políticos, apresenta diferenças relativamente a muitos países africanos, nomeadamente o Níger e o Benim. Analisando os discursos dos jornais camaroneses e comparando-os com discursos similares no Benim e no Níger, este artigo demonstra que desde 1966 os governantes dos Camarões têm criado uma situação de "exceção" no seu método de governação, com o eventual objetivo de criar um modelo de democracia camaronês. Na realidade, o objetivo oculto tem sido o de perpetuar a dominação do partido-Estado no cenário político deste país.

Palavras-chave: Camarões, Benim, Níger, modelo de democracia camaronês, partido-Estado, sistema multipartidário

Since the 1960s, when most African countries got their independence from the colonial masters, there has been, in Africa, a search for democratic solutions. Here and there, many paths were opened, although in general, new African leaders embarked on a path which has been called "African democracy". Cameroon, being an African country, also embarked on a path which seemed to be peculiar. That peculiarity of Cameroon emerged during the 1990s when Africa was swept by what Samuel Huntington called "democracy's third wave". In order to better appraise what seems to be the Cameroonian exception, the analysis of this case should be carried out in comparison with those of Benin and Niger. This study is not the first as far as democracy in Cameroon is concerned nor is it the first comparative study on democracy and democratization in Africa. Victor Julius Ngoh (2001) is a pacesetter in this respect. Studying the case of Cameroon, he arrived at the conclusion that Africans are responsible for the failure or the success of the democratisation process in their countries. Whereas he studied Cameroon from 1960 to 2000, this paper will extend this chronology to 2006 while taking 1966 as a starting point when the one-party system was established in the country. In 2006, the parliament voted a law laying the foundations for the creation of an independent electoral body known as Elections Cameroon (ELECAM). Eboussi-Boulaga (1997) who studied the process of democratisation in Cameroon in the 1990s, analysed the various structures put in place and identified various shortcomings. Zacharie Ngniman (1993) presented the main events of the democratisation process which Cameroon went through as from 1989. This journalistic account looked at the real implications of the decisions taken at one moment or another in framing the Cameroonian path to democracy. All these studies have a weak point which resides in the absence of comparisons with other countries which enable a better understanding of Cameroonian case. This shortcoming is avoided by Mario Azevedo who put Gabon and Cameroon side by side in an effort to show how ethnicity influenced democracy in both countries. In comparative studies, Mamoudou Gazibo (2000, 2002, 2005) made a considerable contribution as he has studied the trajectories followed by Benin and Niger in the democratisation process. Moreover, he called on researchers in the field of political science which allows other disciplines such as history to pay attention to some shortcomings in the comparative methodology. He states for instance that, in a transnational comparison, the researcher is generally more familiar with one case than the other (Gazibo, 2002, p. 441). Moreover, he may have assembled more data for one case than for the other. As a consequence, he might be tempted to bridge the deficit of familiarity or of data by allowing himself to be guided by the case for which he has a better grounding. There is a danger therefore of arriving

at conclusions on the more 'distant' case by the observations drawn from the case the author is most familiar with. The author of this paper is more familiar with the case of Cameroon for which he has gathered sufficient data. In order not to be caught in the trap of the shortcoming presented by Gazibo, the comparison will be limited to specific aspects which Cameroon on the one hand and Benin and Niger on the other shared notably in terms of the paths taken with regard to the creation of new institutions. The comparison will primarily focus on the period after 1990 during which these countries engaged in processes of democratisation. This paper aims to show that, throughout, the democracy Cameroon has been trying to build since independence has been a search for the domination of the ". So, in order to better present the point, the discussion will begin with the notion of democracy, and thereafter, the study will present the first phase of the search for a Cameroonian model of democracy. In comparison with what happened in Benin and Niger, this search resulted in the institution of a 'one-party democracy' which, in Cameroon, was the 'ruling democracy'. The second phase of the search presents the 'advanced democracy' in which the ruling party's intention is to prevail by all possible means.

Africa and the universality of democracy

In a famous interview, former French President, Jacques Chirac, had this to say: "democracy is luxury for Africa"¹ (Ouattara, 2006). Although that was a political declaration, the opinion expressed by Mr Chirac fueled the controversy on the universality of democracy. In principle, democracy is a universal value, but its characteristics are not universal since the interpretation of the concept is not universal. It is in this framework that one can talk of American democracy, African democracy, Cameroonian democracy. This author does not mean that democracy is a stranger to Africa in general and to Cameroon in particular. On the contrary, democracy existed in traditional Africa as one former Premier of West Cameroon, Augustine Ngom Jua, asserted in 1967 (Ngoh, 2001, p. 9). He expressed himself as follows: "the concept of total democracy has its roots in the Cameroonian traditional culture where government has for centuries been the concern of all the people, by all the people and for all the people." In this light, when Carlos Lopes talks of "the africanisation of democracy" he does not mean that there is no democracy in Africa. Rather he affirms that Africans should appropriate the debate on democracy since "there is nothing specifically African in the politics of Africa" (Lopes, 1996, p. 142). The argument is also supported

¹ My translation.

by Robert-Charles Dimi (1999) when he discusses the conversion to democracy, that is, abandoning the monolithic policy that Africa adopted for decades and collided with the principles of democracy. These authors made a point of calling upon Africans who had expressed a different concept of democracy. That is why democracy has come to be prefaced. Nasser talked of “party-less democracy” (Wanyande, 2000, p. 110). It is in this line of prefacing democracy that a path was searched for in Cameroon, with some peculiar stages.

The first phase of the search for the Cameroonian model of democracy or the building of the ‘ruling democracy’

The first phase of the search for a Cameroonian model of democracy began with independence. Ahmadou Ahidjo was the main architect of the scheme, and had a hidden agenda which was to establish the one party system in Cameroon. That system was the foundation of his so called ‘ruling democracy’ that Paul Biya reinforced from 1983 onwards.

The political system in Cameroon before independence and reunification

It is an overstatement to talk of a Cameroonian political system before independence, since Cameroon was under colonial rule. What we had was the political system put in place by the colonial masters. Cameroon had the French and the British as colonial masters. Their political systems differ in some aspects, but in general, after the Second World War, they were characterised by the existence of multiparty politics.

Multiparty politics in Cameroon under French rule

During the last decades of French rule, Cameroonians started taking an active part in the running of their affairs as from 1946 with the institution of the *Assemblée représentative du Cameroun* (ARCAM). The latter was the result of the implementation of the French 1946 constitution which created the French Union. Two years later, the truly Cameroonian political party was created, the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC). It resulted from several changes that affected the *Jeunesse Camerounaise Française* (Jeucafra) and the *Rassemblement Camerounais* (RACAM) (Joseph, 1986, pp.102-105). From 1938, when the Jeucafra was founded, to 1948, when the UPC came into being, no more than one political party effectively existed in French Cameroon. Multiparty politics was actually initiated in 1951 when Dr Louis Paul Aujoulat founded the *Bloc Démocratique Camerounais* (BDC). As the *Assemblée territoriale du Cameroun* (ATCAM) or the Cameroon Territorial

Assembly started functioning in 1952, many other political parties came into existence. They all participated in the political life of Cameroon before 1960, vying for seats either in the French assemblies or in the local assembly. In 1957, autonomy was granted to Cameroon under French rule. That is why a Cabinet was put in place with all the members drawn from the legislative assembly that was elected in 1957. The members of that assembly were the same who voted a motion in 1958 calling for the lifting of the trusteeship and the attainment of independence on January 1, 1960 (Bouopda, 2006, p. 108). The process that was started in Cameroon under French rule was similar to the broader dynamics that occurred in French colonial Africa: in Benin and Niger, after World War II, multiparty politics was also introduced with the formation of many political parties. That was the case till 1960, the year of independence in most French African colonies. A look at Cameroon under British rule shows a similar picture as far multiparty politics is concerned.

Multiparty politics in Cameroon under British rule

Multiparty politics started in the Southern part of Cameroon under British rule in 1953. This was a result of a representation crisis that shook the Eastern House of Assembly.

This part of British Cameroon was at the time called Southern Cameroon. According to the Mandate Agreement and the Trusteeship Agreement, Cameroon was to be administered as an integral part of Nigeria. Therefore, Southern Cameroon was administered from Lagos in accordance with the laws that governed the administration of Nigeria. Southern Cameroon started to have a representative in the Legislative Council in Lagos in 1942, and Chief John Manga Williams was appointed as the representative of Southern Cameroon on that council² (Ngoh, 1990, pp. 22-23; Ebune, 1992, p. 126). As from 1947, when the Richards' constitution became operational, Southern Cameroon had two representatives not in Lagos but in the Eastern House of Assembly as provided by the constitution. The number changed into 13 with the Macpherson Constitution that was promulgated into law in 1951. The new constitution allocated 13 seats to Southern Cameroon in the Eastern House of Assembly. It is in that framework that the 13 representatives of Southern Cameroon were elected. In 1953, a crisis broke out in the Eastern House of Assembly of Nigeria, which gave way to the creation of local political parties.

In a nutshell, the crisis stemmed from the leadership clash that shook the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) (Ngoh 1990, pp. 95-103;

² A typing error has made Ngoh to talk of 1924 instead of 1942. See Ngoh, 1990, p. 23.

Ebune, 1992, pp. 138-141). The president of the party, Nnamdi Azikiwe, was challenged by his deputy, Iyo-Ita. The latter, who was the party's leader in the Eastern House of Assembly, opposed Azikiwe's desire to change the constitution of the party and to reshuffle the NCNC cabinet in order to meet the new demands of the Macpherson constitution. As a consequence, disagreements arose between the members of the party on the question of ministerial posts in the Eastern and Central houses. As Azikiwe wanted to secure the neutrality of the 13 representatives of Southern Cameroon, he made a statement supporting the desire of Southern Cameroonians for a separate region. Later, the declaration happened to be a deceitful one as Solomon Tandeng Muna, who held a ministerial post in the Eastern region, was dismissed. The 13 members, who, in 1952, had declared their support for the NCNC on the grounds that it identified itself with the cause of Southern Cameroon, were divided as four of them continued supporting the president of the party. During the May 6, 1953 sitting of the Regional Legislature, the nine other representatives walked out, thus paralysing the Assembly's proceedings. The result was the dissolution of the House and the convening of fresh elections which the nine representatives decided to boycott. After the dissolution of the House, the nine representatives returned to Southern Cameroon which they toured while explaining the latest developments to their electorate. Subsequently, they organised a conference which took place in Mamfe on May 22-25, 1953, and produced a petition requesting the creation of a separate autonomous legislature for Southern Cameroon. It is at this conference that political associations started merging to form political parties. Thus, the crisis in the Eastern House of Assembly was an incentive to the creation of political parties in Southern Cameroon. The maiden political party was the Kamerun National Congress (KNC), which was a merger of the Cameroons National Federation (CNF) chaired by Dr Endeley and the Kamerun United National Congress (KUNC) headed by Dibonge.

The KNC was officially launched in June 1953 with Endeley, leader of the former CNF, as the president and Dibonge, president of the former KUNC, as patron. The Secretary General of the KUNC, Mbile, did not adhere to the new party since he had serious differences with Endeley. The differences were such that Mbile split from the benevolent Bloc formed by some representatives of Southern Cameroon in the Eastern House of Assembly whilst the 1953 crisis was unfolding; therefore, he could not join the KNC. As Mbile also needed a political party for his own ambitions, after the formation of the KNC he gathered his followers and teamed up with P.M. Kale to form the Kamerun People's Party (KPP), the second political party of Southern Cameroon (Ngoh, 1990, p. 105). The creation of this political

party introduced multiparty politics in Southern Cameroon, as political differences led to the split of existing and the creation of new political parties. By 1961, when the plebiscite for reunification was held, Southern Cameroon had many political parties amongst which the most important were, besides those mentioned above: the One Kamerun (OK), the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) and the Cameroons Peoples' National Convention (CPNC). These political parties competed for seats and positions as Southern Cameroon was granted a quasi-regional status in 1954 and a regional status in 1959. In the process, alternation occurred until reunification changed the political scene.

The liquidation of the multiparty politics as a means of achieving 'ruling democracy'

The end of the multiparty politics was led by Ahmadou Ahidjo who masterminded the whole process in accordance with a hidden agenda that clearly emerges here. According to the political bureau of the Cameroon National Union (CNU), in the course of his political career, Ahmadou Ahidjo never hesitated to destroy what he had patiently put in place when the general interest was at stake (Bureau politique de l'UNC, 1968, p. 14). It is in this spirit that, in 1956, he dissolved the regional association he himself headed, i.e. the *Association Amicale de la Bénoué*, to form the *Evolution politique du Nord Cameroun* by means of which he regrouped parliamentarians of Northern Cameroon. That proved to be a prelude to the creation of a political party for Northern Cameroon. In 1957, Ahmadou Ahidjo was elected to the Legislative Assembly, and became a member of the first French Cameroon Cabinet of May 1957 occupying the post of Minister of Interior. He was one of the key actors of the cabinet crisis that led to the collapse of the Mbida Cabinet, only to become the new Premier. Being Prime Minister without a political party base, Ahidjo understood that he had no backing and urgently needed one. He had observed that, in Northern Cameroon, each region had a major regional association; thus, if these associations could be grouped under one umbrella, a political party, Northern Cameroon would have a stronger voice, and he, the Premier, would enjoy a stronger power base. He embarked on the task of convincing leaders of regional associations. The task was not an easy one as resistance was raised in some quarters. He finally succeeded in convincing them. As a result, in April 1958, they all assembled in Garoua and the result was the creation of the political party, the *Union Camerounaise* (UC) (Bayart, 1978, p. 52), which provided Ahidjo with a new instrument at his disposal in order to achieve his goals.

In assuming the premiership, he learnt, from the various parliamentary sessions, that his office was precarious in the parliamentary system that operated

in Cameroon since the advent of the autonomy regime. In October 1959, the parliament voted the law granting full powers to the Premier. So, when French Cameroon acceded to independence in 1960, the Premier enjoyed full powers without a parliament, given that the ALCAM was dissolved before independence. Ahidjo used the full powers he enjoyed to mastermind the constitutional referendum of February 21, 1960 which changed the political system of Cameroon from a parliamentary to a semi-presidential one. The new constitution established in article 13 that the first President would be elected by an Electoral College comprising parliamentarians and notables (Gaillard, 1994, p. 111; Bouopda, 2006, p. 140); in the end the Electoral College was restricted to parliamentarians. The parliamentary elections which took place in April 1960 were gerrymandered and rigged to the advantage of the *Union Camerounaise* that won the majority of seats. As parliament was to elect the first President, Ahmadou Ahidjo, being the only candidate, won. In his capacity as President of the Republic he could then look forward in implementing his hidden agenda.

The next stage was to unify all the political parties of the country into one. In September 1960, during the third ordinary congress of the *Union Camerounaise*, Ahmadou Ahidjo appealed for the building of a great national party. The first move in that direction went towards the creation of the *Mouvement d'Action Nationale du Cameroun* that had only one parliamentarian in the National Assembly, Charles Assalé, whom Ahidjo appointed Prime Minister. By appointing him, Ahmadou Ahidjo was calling on that party and the regional association, the *Union Tribale Bantou*, which supported Assalé, to join the ranks of the *Union Camerounaise*. The new Premier, who controlled the *Union Tribale Bantou*, thought in vain that the merger of his party and his association could be obtained after negotiations. That was not the President's plan who preferred a merger without any negotiation, and in 1961 the MANC joined the ranks of the *Union Camerounaise*. Assalé resisted dissolving his association and as Ahidjo increased the pressure, and fearing the loss of his prime ministerial post, he convened a meeting of his association on September 8, 1962 in order to dissolve it (Kpwang, 1997, pp. 300-303). During the meeting, he called on his fellow members to join the *Union Camerounaise*. So, by will or by force, Cameroonians were to heed to the Maroua 1960 call for the building of the great national party which would be the single party. True to this logic, the UPC members were forced to join the *Union Camerounaise* as in 1962 their congress was brutally dispersed by the police under the pretext that the party "had publicly bailed out the rebellion" (Ettangondop, 2004, p. 115; Bouopda, 2006, pp. 160-161). The suppression of the congress then compelled the members of the UPC to join the ranks of the *Union Camerounaise*. Some political parties such as the

Parti des Démocrates of André Marie Mbida tried to resist the suppression of multiparty politics but not for too long. Eventually, they were compelled to toe the line since, in the 1965 federal parliamentary elections, they were unable to constitute a list of candidates. Their leaders understood that the parties lacked effective representation and decided to join the *Union Camerounaise*. In East Cameroon, everything was ready for the agenda to be completed.

One of the tricks used by Ahidjo to implement his hidden agenda was to form, in conjunction with the KNDP of John Ngu Foncha, a “national united group” and a coordinating committee in the Federal House of Assembly. That was done after reiterating of the call for the building of a great national party in November 1961. The appeal received a favourable welcome in West Cameroon. This was made possible by the internal problems that this federated state was experiencing. In the opinion of the KNDP, the opposition political party, the CPNC, was likely to dissolve and merge in the KNDP before the latter party could negotiate the deal of building a great national party with Ahidjo and his UC. In doing so, the leader of the KNDP, Foncha, was to be Ahidjo’s sole interlocutor in negotiations for the great national party. The party experienced serious dissensions when John Ngu Foncha resigned his office of Premier to become the vice-president of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. In fact, the legitimate ambitions of his lieutenants for his succession and his desire not to be cut off from his political basis generated some clashes which eventually led Solomon Tandeng Muna and Egbe Tabi to form the Cameroon United Congress (CUC). This left West Cameroon with three political parties. The actions of the CPNC and the CUC weakened the position of the KNDP and gave way to Ahidjo to stand as the referee of the game, maintaining his mastery of the situation. As West Cameroon politicians were dragging their feet on the path of the building of a great national party, Ahidjo became impatient. On June 11, 1965, he convened the Premiers of the two federated states and the leaders of the three West Cameroonian political parties in Yaoundé and drove home the necessity of a single party for the proper functioning of the Federation (Ettangondop, 2004, p. 131). He succeeded in convincing them and they put up a committee in charge of elaborating the structures of the single party. Progressively, political parties of West Cameroon were dissolved and on September 1, 1966, the Cameroon National Union, the single party, was created. Ahidjo’s dream had come true.

Cameroon was not the only African country that engaged in the single-party political system, given that it was a notable trend in Africa after independence. Virtually all African states established the one party system using the arguments presented by Peter Wanyande (2000, pp. 108-109). Firstly, African rulers said that

multiparty system was foreign to Africa and of Western origin. Secondly, they argued that Africa, being underdeveloped, needed to concentrate on her economic development that needed the energy of all the citizens in one country³. Multiparty politics was not conducive to such development, and would rather divide the energies of the populations without any positive effects. That is why, in Niger, the one party system was established at independence with the *Parti Progressiste Nigérien* (PPN) as the national wing of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) dominating until 1974 when Seyni Kountché overthrew Hamani Diori (Grémah, 1999; Raynaud & Abba, 1990, p. 16). The existence of the single party was embedded in the constitution that Kountché suspended and ruled without political party till his death in 1987. Ali Saïbou took over and put in place the , the *Mouvement National pour la Société de Développement* (MNSD), which operated as the single party in accordance with the constitution he put in place within two years after taking power. When Benin acceded to independence Hubert Maga established the single party system that lasted only for three years. In 1963, a putsch ousted him and, since then, the country was plagued by instability that culminated in 1972 with the coming to power of Mathieu Kérékou who, again, institutionalised the one party system with the *Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin* (PRPB) (Magnusson, 1996, p. 33). Like in Niger, this political system was embedded in the constitutions put in place by Maga and Kérékou respectively. Therein lies the difference with the system in Cameroon given that the establishment of the single party politics in Cameroon in 1966 was not preceded nor followed by any constitutional amendment. The 1961 federal constitutional still provided in his article 3 what follows:

The political parties and groups play a part in the expression of the suffrage. They shall be free to form and to carry on their activities within the limits established by law and regulations.

They must respect the principles of democracy and national sovereignty (Enonchong, 1967, p. 255).

This option seemed not to contradict the will of Ahmadou Ahidjo who was a militant of democracy but his own democracy, that is the 'ruling democracy' he wanted for Cameroon. The argument for this brand of democracy does not differ from the ideas that were put forward elsewhere in Africa in order to justify the single party system. African or Cameroonian democracy should not be a mere imitation of what is enforced in the West. In the words of Ahmadou Ahidjo,

³ Peter Wayande, the author, does not share these arguments developed by African political leaders, but rather opposes them as he demonstrated their fallacy in his contribution quoted here.

“freely, and in sovereign fashion, we have chosen democracy; but the democratic systems of the West and Eastern Europe are not products that can directly be exported to African countries” (Cameroon National Union, 1976, p. 43). The ‘ruling democracy’ needs unity which enables stability and the rule of an individual through the single party that is accepted by all in a Presidential regime as Ahidjo himself asserted.

Our Presidential regime represents a double advantage for the State. First of all, it allows the Head of State to stand as a symbol of unity for an emerging nation.

In second place, it allows the executive to play its full role as the driving force for national development in conformity with the national constitution which provides for both the separation and the collaboration of powers in a spirit of complementarity, as required of the whole civil service by its adhesion to one single party.

It is in consideration of the latter point that we have described our political system as a ‘ruling democracy’, in contrast to the regimes where the executive is constantly paralysed by rifts of popular opinion [sic opinions] power struggles and conflicts of individual interests (Cameroon National Union, 1976, pp. 44-45).

In the system of ‘ruling democracy’ there is no competition, but a single party that dominates. The party is the , which dominates all other institutions in the country. The country’s institutions are used to promote the party that serves the interest of those who control both the party and the state. It means therefore that the is out to promote the interests of the rulers which are opposed to national interests. As Peter Wanyande (2000, p. 113) observed, in such a system, the gap between the rulers and the ruled has led those who control state power to be repressive and less responsive to the wishes of the society which are not taken in consideration. The rulers instead use the various institutions, which are normally designed to promote national interest, as tools for the promotion of their parochial interests. From 1966 to 1990, that is what Cameroonians got from the ‘ruling democracy’: i.e. the domination of the almost enslaved the country’s citizens in the interest of the party and its leaders.

The second phase of the search for the Cameroonian model of democracy or the building of the ‘advanced democracy’

This phase of the search for the Cameroonian model of democracy is characterised by the resistance to the multiparty politics and the implementation of what has been termed ‘advanced democracy’, as result of mounting pressure.

The 'advanced democracy' is summed up as a democracy of the domination of the former .

The advent of multiparty democracy in Africa

In the 1980s, Africa was stricken by a severe economic crisis which resulted in the bankruptcy of nearly all the countries of the continent, which as a result had to resort to the Bretton Woods institutions. The general remedy prepared for bankrupt African countries is the implementation of a structural adjustment plan. The acceptance of this structural adjustment plan is a condition any bilateral financial assistance. This adjustment plan is composed of harsh economic measures which can produce tensions and popular dissatisfaction. Facing this complex situation, African leaders were called upon to advance with putting in place democratic institutions before aspiring for financial support. That is what François Mitterrand stated in his opening speech during the France Africa summit that took place in La Baule in June 1990. He said that France would continue to help African countries but that assistance would be "half-hearted" for countries with authoritarian regimes and would be "wholehearted" for countries that would, with courage, embark on democratisation (Hugues, 2007).

The advent of multiparty democracy in Benin and Niger

Benin was the first African country to be swept by "democracy's third wave". It is in this country that the maiden sovereign national conference was organised as from February 19, 1990. Robert Dossou (2000) has given a good account of the preparation, the sessions and the result of the Beninese national conference that ended on February 28, 1990. From this account, one learns many things. The first is that, facing a difficult situation, the Beninese leaders decided to meet and initiate a dialogue before finding adequate solutions. Hence, the national conference framed the trajectory for democratisation. This forum set up new institutions which were transitory: the President was stripped of some of his former powers that went to the transitional Premier and the former National Assembly was replaced by the *Haut Conseil de la République*, the members of which were elected by the national conference. The transition period was to last one year, from March 1, 1990 to March 1, 1991. During this period, the transitional institutions were to implement the decisions taken by the national conference, notably the drafting of the constitution by the committee appointed by the conference, the organisation of the constitutional referendum and the holding of various elections. On April 1, 1991, the new date set for the end of the transitional period as provided by the new constitution of December 1990, the process had been completed. The new setting in Benin was the result of a confabulation and not the decision of an

individual. The new institutions have worked well, experiencing political alternation, which is a fundamental principle of democracy. There have been some improvements, notably the creation, in 1995, of an independent body for the organisation of elections. That novelty came about as a result of the dialogue and consensus which forms the corner stone of the new political setting in Benin. The Beninese experience has been depicted as a success story, which is why it has been imitated in some African countries like Chad, Gabon, Congo and Niger. The President of Niger acknowledged its success and praised the Beninese for that undertaking in one of the opening speeches of the conference that took place in February 2000 in Cotonou to draw up a balance of national conferences and democratic transitions. That is why the citizens of Niger claimed the organisation of such a conference in their country in 1991.

In Niger, the sovereign national conference opened on July 29, 1991 and lasted for ninety eight days. It should be recalled that, when the citizens of that country started their claim for democratisation, the ruling opposed to change. The first step in the resistance was the appointment of Mahamadou Halilou as the mediator whose duty was to improve relations between the state on the one hand and the trade unions and students on the other (Salifou, 2000). The second step of the party's resistance resided in the move of the Head of State to alone decide on the advent of multiparty politics in Niger. As a matter of fact, facing mounting pressure, Ali Saïbou, on November 15, 1990, announced, during a meeting of what was then the steering committee of the single party, that he had opted for multiparty politics. On December 4, 1990, he added that nascent political parties could apply for temporary authorization before the revision of the constitution enabling their legalization. These delaying tactics did not satisfy the demands of the protesters who intensified their actions that finally compelled the rulers in Niger to comply with the demand for the convening of a national conference. As in Benin, the national conference of Niger drew up a balance of the past while proposing new perspectives for the country's future. Transitional institutions were set up for 15 months, including the Head of State whose powers were reduced in favour of the transitional Prime Minister appointed by the conference, Cheffou Amadou. A transitional parliament was established called the *Haut Conseil de la République*. The national conference adopted a charter for political parties and appointed a committee for the drafting of the new constitution. The experience of Niger, *mutatis mutandis*, is also considered to be a success story. This may sound like an overstatement given that one can ask the question as to why the process was interrupted by military coups. Of course Niger witnessed two coups, one of which was a bloody one. As the arguments put forward by Mamoudou Gazibo

(2000) provide an explanation for the case of Benin which received what has been called a “premium for democracy” that helped the country to solve most of its financial difficulties, thus pre-empting actions like those witnessed in Niger. That was not the case for the latter country. Here, the national conference had nearly rejected the agreement with the Bretton Woods institutions without proposing any credible alternative. The financial difficulties of the country worsened and paralysed the actions of the government. As the constitution of Niger opted for the semi-presidential regime, the path was opened for instability, since political leaders self-interest caused them to defend those rather identifying with Niger’s national interests. The institutions came to be paralysed because their leaders were competing for control and gain advantages as the new situation developed. The institutional paralysis had a boomerang effect as the army took the opportunity to intervene, reacting to the humiliation it suffered during and after the national conference. The Nigeriens did not know that, in a country where the army had been part and parcel of its national institutions, they were not to receive any harsh treatment. Instead they had to be cajoled and, by so doing, they could go back to their barracks and stay there without any temptation of returning to power. The Nigeriens learnt a good lesson from that sad experience. They applied it in 2000 when they decided to grant amnesty to the authors of the 1996 and 1999 coups. The return to civilian rule through elections in 2000 resulted mainly from the spirit of dialogue and consensus established during the national conference, which in the case of Niger, can be considered an important asset. It is only the beginning of Niger’s experience that can be likened to that of Cameroon, as this country resisted the advent of the multiparty system.

The advent of multiparty democracy in Cameroon

In 1982, Ahmadou Ahidjo resigned as Head of State and, as provided by the constitution, Paul Biya succeeded to the helm of Cameroon. The new President, on taking the oath of office declared that there would be continuity. It meant that he would continue with the ‘ruling democracy’. His predecessor had long remained at the helm of the single party. As it was a whose chairman was also Head of State, the confusion between the party and the state caused problems to arise. Cameroon was in a situation of political duality that generated the problem of pre-eminence between the party and the state. As long as one individual was the Head of State and the chairman of the party, this problem would not arise. That not being the case anymore, the holder of either position could obviously interpret the situation in his favour. The situation degenerated and soon an open crisis arose when the 1983 coup was nipped in the bud and a coup aborted in the

following year. Consequently, Ahmadou Ahidjo resigned from the chairmanship of the party. Paul Biya replaced him, then accumulating the two positions, which signified a return to the situation as it existed before 1982. In his new position, he transformed the CNU into the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) that became the state party. Apparently, the new party and its leaders had a foresight as to the advent of multiparty politics and anticipated measures in order to resist it. The first measure came into force in 1986 during the renewal of the basic institutions of the ruling party that witnessed a plurality of candidates' lists (Sindjoun, 1997, p. 97). In 1987, for the town council elections, the experience was renewed, and likewise in 1988 for the parliamentary elections. It is worth mentioning here that the experience began in November 1983. The electoral law governing the presidential election was amended, giving room for a plurality of candidates; indeed, the context called for such a move: after the 1983 aborted coup, Biya was in search of legitimacy. In the CNU, only the party could put a candidate up for election, but as the chairman of the party, he was not prepared to allow the candidacies of challengers. For the parliamentary and town council elections, the competition was within the single party. This overture was in fact a smoke screen aimed at showing that the political process was actually democratic in the country. It was an anticipated resistance to the advent of the multiparty system in Cameroon. The argument was used in 1990 when the first attempts for the creation of new political parties were made.

In the first quarter of 1990, Yondo Mandengué Black, Albert Mukong, Anicet Ekanet and others were arrested in Douala, allegedly for having held illegal meetings and for having distributed tracts hostile to the Head of State and calling for violence (Ngniman, 1993, p. 46; Sindjoun, 1999, p. 86). However, the real reasons given for the arrest were that the arrested persons wanted to form a political party. The move was illegal as there was a *de facto* single party system in Cameroon. These Cameroonians were tried before the military court so as to give credit to the official version of their arrest, and were sentenced to minor imprisonment terms. The show of force was designed to dissuade anybody to embark upon a move towards creating a political party and to challenge the state party with a view to bring about a multiparty system in Cameroon. And in order to drive home the message, marches were organized by the one-party-state in the main cities of the country to protest against multiparty system and in support of the single party system. A mass to that effect was also celebrated in the Yaoundé cathedral bringing together Catholics, Protestants and even Moslems. The show of force was again staged on May 26, 1990, during the launching of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in Bamenda. It resulted in the killing of six Cameroonians. In the

meantime, external pressure was growing and the speech of François Mitterrand at La Baule seems to have been the last stroke that broke the camel's back.

From resistance to the 'advanced democracy'

Although the single state party finally yielded to pressures coming from within and from society at large and accepted the multiparty democracy, it tailored that democracy to suit the will of the rulers in the following terms: as multiparty politics has been forced upon the country, the new system should be that of the domination of the ruling party. This domination would be carried out through adapted laws and bodies.

After the La Baule summit, the first ordinary congress of the CPDM opened in Yaoundé on June 28, 1990. During the congress, the chairman of the party asked his fellow comrades to prepare for "possible competition". The words used portrayed some hesitation which was another sign of resistance, without giving any assurance to the path to be followed. Reducing it to a possibility meant that, in the mind of the chairman of the CPDM, who doubled as Head of State, there was still hope that the advent of multiparty system in Cameroon could be pre-empted. Eventually, that was not the case and in December 1990, the single state party passed several laws, notably the law governing political parties. It is on the basis of this law that the first political parties were legalized in February 1991. Most of the political parties newly born claimed to be opposition parties. They immediately organized into a coalition of opposition parties and called for the convening of a sovereign national conference in order to assess the general state of the nation and define major political, economic, social and cultural guidelines for the future. In reality, knowing what had been the outcome of the national conference in Benin, they nursed the idea of obtaining a share of political power. The ruling CPDM also knew what had happened in that country and was not willing to share power or to have a Head of State stripped of some of his powers. Moreover, in the 'advanced democracy' the CPDM regime had started putting in place, the state party was to single-handedly decide everything. There was no room for dialogue and consensus.

The opposition mounted pressure on the government by organizing a country-wide civil disobedience campaign and Ghost Towns operations which were marked by acts of violence and vandalism (Mbu, 1993, pp. 44-81; Ngniman, 1993, pp. 88-95). In reaction, the government took tough measures such as the creation of operational commands in the provinces that had heeded the opposition call. The country recorded many casualties as a result of the interventions of these operational commands. In the meantime, the economy was in decline and state

authority weakened in the process. In order to avoid a downward spiral and stand firm, the ruling CPDM government conjured a trick to wrong foot the opposition. Instead of convening a national conference, Paul Biya convened a tripartite conference with the government, political parties and neutral personalities. Eboussi-Boulaga observed (1997, pp. 94-95) that most of the so called independent personalities were members of the ruling CPDM who were in cahoots with the representatives of the government. As a result, the forum that took place from October 30 to November 15, 1991 was dominated by the former state party. Its two-item agenda was to put in place mixed committees in charge of drafting the electoral law and a project governing the access of political parties to public media. From the composition of the forum which was presided over by the then Premier Sadou Hayatou, nothing revolutionary could be expected. The ruse was successful as, at the end of the tripartite conference, the Yaoundé Declaration was signed by participants and the representatives of 40 of the 47 legalized political parties (Ngniman, 1993, pp.194-195). The government lifted the ban on public meetings and demonstrations as well as dissolving the operational commands. The political parties, especially the opposition, agreed to withdraw the call for civil disobedience and to respect the laws and regulations regarding their activities. The signatories of the Yaoundé Declaration also agreed to put in place a tripartite technical committee in order to draft proposals relating to constitutional reform. As the political tension was eased in the country, the government could go ahead with its agenda, including one important item which was the holding of parliamentary elections. A law was needed to govern the elections and it was incumbent on the CPDM parliament to pass that law and other proposals, notably the law governing presidential elections.

Legislating in favour of the former state party

The last session of the single state party parliament which was held in 1991, proved to be of great importance with regard to Cameroon's future political landscape. It was supposed to lay the foundations for the 'advanced democracy' envisaged by the single party government.

The first draft bill voted upon was the one governing the election of parliamentarians. During the debate, the idea of enfranchising Cameroonians from nineteen years of age old was put forward and portrayed as the general opinion and call from the nation. The idea was rejected and the age of twenty was proposed as a threshold in the draft bill. In justifying their choice, the parliamentarians argued that the recent experience had shown that youths were not very responsible persons since they were at the forefront of civil disobedience and violence.

The truth is that parliament feared the sanction of the youth vote. This group had been severely affected by the economic crisis and unemployment and was very disgruntled at the time. Enfranchising too many of them was regarded as a risk of giving votes to the opposition that could as a result end up dominating the political landscape. For the CPDM to dominate, it would be preferable to enfranchise only part of this group of potential voters. The law that was finally passed by the parliament allowed for gerrymandering and vote rigging. Article 3 of that law promulgated on December 16, 1991, provided that the constituency was the main electoral division. But some constituencies could be specially carved out given their particular situation. In the 1992 snap parliamentary elections, there was no special constituency. The ruling CPDM did not win any seat in the North West province, the stronghold of the SDF. In the 1997 parliamentary elections, Bali Kumbat was carved out of the Ngo-Ketunja Division as a special constituency. There, the CPDM candidate was the Fon of Bali Kumbat who used his traditional influence to win the seat, thereby giving the CPDM one sole parliamentarian in the whole North-West province. Hence, the CPDM claimed to be the only national political party as it had a parliamentarian in all the provinces contrary to other political parties that were merely regional organisations. For the upcoming twin elections, the Head of State, who is also chairman of the CPDM, once more resorted to gerrymandering. This time round, he undermined the bastions of all opposition parties. In the North-West province, the stronghold of the SDF, Mezam, Donga-Mantung, Momo and Menchum divisions were divided into at least two constituencies each. The Magba special constituency, with one seat, was carved out from the Noun division, a stronghold of the Cameroon Democratic Union (CDU) that had won the five seats since 1997. From all indications Magba seemed to be a stronghold of the CPDM in the Noun division. The official explanation given to this carving up of divisions is that it was a way of approximating rulers and ruled. In order to reinforce this argument, it was said that even the bastions of the CPDM had been 'carved out'. The true story is that the regime wanted to create favourable conditions for the ruling party. The law governing parliamentary elections established in articles 5 and 6 that elections were to be carried out according to the ballot lists; the list that obtained the absolute majority wins all the constituency seats. In case the winning list had a relative majority, half the seats were allocated to it, while the rest of seats were to be distributed proportionally to the other lists. The special constituencies were created on the basis of the results the CPDM obtained in past elections. It was expected that the trend would be similar so that the ruling party would have a majority of the seats in the new divisions. The argument of bringing the administration closer to the ruled can

therefore be easily be rejected: after all the carving out of novel constituencies in CPDM bastions was a means of healing wounds provoked by the recent renewal of basic organs of the ruling party. The new town councils had been created with the same intentions.

For the town council elections, new councils were created on April 22, 2007, two days after the convening of the electorate, a move which amounted to glaring foul play, given that this should normally be done before the calling of elections. It was not the first time that the regime used these foul tricks in favour of the ruling party. In 1997, the town council elections were won in Bamenda, Limbe, Kumba Bafoussam and Garoua by the opposition; subsequently, the Head of State appointed CPDM officials at the helm of these councils, thereby transforming the likely defeat of his party into a victory (Ngoh, 2001, p. 34).

In the 1992 snap parliamentary elections, the CPDM failed to win the absolute majority of the 180 seats which would have enabled it to rule without allies. An alliance was concluded with the *Mouvement Démocratique pour la Défense de la République* (MDR), and was later extended to the UPC and the National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP). In the alliance, the three political parties contributed to legislating in favour of the former state party, but in the process, they also defended their own interests. An illustration can be given with the September 1992 extraordinary session of the parliament convened in order to vote the law governing presidential election. The draft bill submitted provided for a one round, single candidate ballot. Moreover, the president, who enjoyed a five year term, was re-eligible and the candidates should have resided in Cameroon for the three years preceding the election (Ngniman, 1993, p. 259). The final bill voted by the parliament changed the residency clause, and was the outcome of negotiations with the NUDP that was up for a two round election. Since its chairman, Bello Bouba Maigari intended to be his party's candidate and had resided in Cameroon only for the past thirteen months, the draft disqualified him. So, the deal with CPDM stated that the residency clause be reduced from three years to one year and that the one round ballot system should be maintained (Sindjoun, 1997, p. 100). The same bill provided that a candidate could not be invested by more than one party. This clause was aimed at preventing a unique opposition candidate and therefore worked in favour of the ruling CPDM. In the snap presidential election that took place on October 1992, Biya won with 39.97% as against 35.96% for Ni John Fru Ndi. The latter blamed his defeat on electoral rigging, an accusation which was once more directed at the single party in 1997 when the CPDM won the parliamentary elections with 116 out of 180 seats. Therefore, the opposition launched its claim for the creation of an independent electoral body

to manage the elections in Cameroon for the sake of transparency. The boycott by the SDF and the CDU of the 1997 presidential elections was precisely based upon the refusal of the government to put in place such a body that was in existence in countries like Benin. The government's refusal was on the grounds that it did not want imported models. But in the end it yielded to mounting pressures, but in putting in place the body in question, it again made sure that it would not work against the ruling party.

In 2000, parliament voted the bill creating a body in charge of supervising elections in Cameroon, i.e. the National Elections Observatory, better known by its French acronym, ONEL. The latter was imported from Senegal where it had been created in 1997. How is it that those who opposed imported models should suddenly import one? The answer can only be found in the intention of the rulers to legislate in favour of the continued dominance of the ruling party. If the government did import a model, it was supposed to be harmless to the ruling party. That then, can only be understood in the light of the context in which the ONEL was presented by Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (2000). In Senegal, the ONEL was accepted by Abdou Diouf and his political party only as a means of pre-empting the creation of the independent body that was claimed by the opposition. The independent body called for was to take care of the whole electoral process from the registration on electoral rolls to the proclamation of the results. It seemed to be disadvantageous to the ruling party to refuse such a model. As the opposition insisted, the government finally yielded to demands by appointing a committee made up of independent personalities and experts that was in charge of presiding over discussions grouping all the political parties of Senegal. It is on the basis of the work done by this committee that Abdou Diouf created ONEL, the role of which was merely to supervise and control elections, as ONEL had no effective power. Surprisingly, thanks to the commitment of its members to democracy and neutrality, ONEL eventually produced spectacular results, and decisively contributed to the 2000 alternation in Senegal.

The Cameroonian ONEL was also divested of power, and only meant to supervise and control elections. But ONEL in Cameroon was not created on the basis of discussions between political parties: it was a single-handed creation of the government with the blessings of the CPDM dominated parliament. The Cameroonian ONEL members could not be credited with impartiality. Its first president, Enoch Kwayeb, was a CPDM member. What could one expect as far as political neutrality was concerned from such a president? As ONEL had no credit and the opposition still claimed a real independent body, the government, still under pressure, opted for the creation of Elections Cameroon (ELECAM). The draft bill for ELECAM gave

the impression that it was a really independent body as it has the task of organising, managing and supervising the whole electoral process in Cameroon. But as elections approached in Cameroon, the government laid down in article 42 of the draft that before the creating ONEL, the administration would continue to organise elections. The clause was understood as a procrastinating measure illustrating the will of the government not to accept an independent body for the management of elections. Since the CPDM enjoyed the majority in the parliament, nothing could counter the voting of the bill. Facing the protestation of the opposition that staged a walk out, the government changed the clause by allowing a period of 18 months for the establishment of ELECAM. As elections had been convened for July 22, 2007, the administration would again work in favour of the ruling party, illustrating the workings of the 'advanced democracy' on the move.

Conclusion

All in all, Cameroon, since independence, has been searching for its own model of democracy. That democracy was to be its own brand and not an imported model. The first stage was the institution of the 'ruling democracy'. This Cameroonian brand was characterized by the establishment of the single party system designed to assure the domination of a handful of individuals through the sole political party that identified itself with the state. The one-party system was after all the general model for Africa. But in comparison with Benin and Niger, Cameroon had a particular model of its own. The Cameroonian exception lay in the fact that the system was a *de facto* one party system as the constitution still provided for multiparty politics, but not a *de jure* one. In the 1990s, Cameroon was forced into the multiparty system. As the rulers did not want the new system, they instituted the 'advanced democracy' that aimed at insuring the domination of the ruling party which was the former state party. All legislation regarding the political system has adhered to that spirit. In comparison with Benin and Niger, the striking difference lies in the absence of dialogue in Cameroon. Whereas in these countries political change was carried out through dialogue, in Cameroon the government shied away from dialogue, preferring to dictate. That circumstance largely accounts for the absence of alternation at the helm of the state. The 'advanced democracy' that succeeded the 'ruling democracy' model seems to differ little from the former since it is still based upon the domination of the political scene by a single party. On the face of it, the 'advanced democracy' seems to be equivalent to the multiparty system, but in reality is far from a truly democratic system when assessed on the basis of the criteria for democracy listed by Peter

Wanyande. The prospect for the near future is that ELECAM should constitute a guarantee for freedom, transparency and fairness of elections. Consequently, there can be hope for alternation and for subsequent real dialogue much needed by democracy.

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