Democracy and the Construction of Allogeny/Autochthony in Postcolonial Cameroon

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Since independence Cameroon has been a hegemonic state, evidenced by the 1966 introduction of a single party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU), which was purportedly created to foster national integration. This focus on national integration led to a de-emphasis of all other issues such as fundamental human rights. And because a select elite assigned itself the task of imagining the form the nation would take, this process was naturally accompanied by a contraction of the political space. Because the national integration project had paid minimal dividends after more than two decades, Cameroonians refused to legitimize it. They had realized that it simply served as a ruse for the ruling class to convert the state into a patrimonial one. Hence, people sought to regain their voices and participation through the democratic process. Reluctantly, the state capitulated to demands for political pluralism, passing the so-called Liberal Laws of 1990. However, by allowing multiparty politics, the government ruptured the facade of cohesion of the ruling class, which resulted in elites becoming increasingly preoccupied with maintaining their power and losing interest in the national integration project.

As a result of this rupture, national integration, once the holy grail of national policy, was displaced, if not replaced, by newer concepts of *autochthones* and *allogenes*. Cameroonians who had been urged to settle anywhere in the country by President Paul Biya were now being denied their civil and political rights. Administrators, political elites, or indigenes (autochthones) of an area denied them the right to vote just because they were considered settlers or strangers (*allogenes*). Boundaries between the various groups could easily be established because state policy required that the ethnic origin of all Cameroonians ("native of") be indicated on their birth certificates. Because differences are a tool for both self-defense and conquest, they conflict with democracy, which sees individuals as being endowed with equal political liberty.

Conflict arose because of a particular reading of the 1996 Constitution that granted state protection to minorities and protected the rights of indigenous populations. Protecting the rights of these groups per se was laudable. However, this protection was not supposed to cause prejudice toward other citizens. Guarantees to this end were also included in the Constitution, which recognized the right of every person to settle in any place and to move about freely, subject only to the statutory provisions concerning public law and order. But most political entrepreneurs intent on denying people equal political liberty refused to read the proviso granting protection to minorities in conjunction with this article.

With a view to accumulating political credit and acquiring legitimacy, political parties claimed to be the only guarantee for the protection of these rights. The Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), the latter-day rendition of the CNU, exacerbated this trend by claiming that the new parties legalized in the wake of the 1990 law were not sociologically representative of the "nation." Though more than 120 parties dotted the political landscape in 1997, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) was singled out for that indictment. The SDF was presented and represented as either a Bamenda party or an Anglo-Bamileke party. Bamenda people and Bamilekes constitute the bulk of the "stranger" population in other parts of Cameroon. But the CPDM's claim that new political parties did not represent Cameroon well can be ascertained only through an analysis of empirical data such as voting trends. A priori, one can begin to doubt its veracity because Section 9 of Law No. 90-56 on the creation of political parties stipulates: "No party shall be authorized to exist if it undermines the territorial integrity, national unity, the republican character of the state, national sovereignty and national integration, in particular through any type of discrimination based on tribe, province, linguistic group or religious discrimination."

The Nature of Politics in Cameroon

What the CPDM introduced into Cameroonian political culture was an atmosphere in which people were motivated to vote for or join the party because they would be given cooking oil and meat. Of course, the size of the payoff for membership increased on a pro rata basis with a person's credentials. This culture persists and was reinforced as a result of the introduction of a multiparty system. Programmatic concerns that parties are supposed to reflect in their activities received little emphasis. In the political grammar of the CDPM, politics is a *njangui* or a game of "scratch my back, I scratch yours." Simply put, it is a win-win game, predicated on a form of exchange in which ethnic barons[1] had the responsibil-

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ity to align their people with the CPDM. Failure to do so not only cost them their jobs but also reduced the state's exposure (in terms of revenue allocation) to their people. This case was clearly articulated by some members of the CPDM government when they claimed that the state would not give grants to any locality that voted for the opposition in the 1996 municipal elections.

Against this backdrop, dissent, a normal practice in democratic political culture, was seen as creating conflict. Rather than place a premium on the individual, as is the case in democracies, the tendency was to opt for deindividualization. In post-1990 Cameroon, elites have had a penchant to build and maintain réseaux that have an ethnic coloration. Administrative officials such as *préfets* have been instrumental in guiding this ethnic coloration, which has produced a synergy, arguably beneficial to the CPDM but clearly prejudicial to the other political parties. Focusing on the Southwest province, I show how ethnic politics has been used in an attempt to exclude the SDF from the province by labeling it as a Bamenda party. Admittedly, the SDF was founded on May 26, 1990, in Bamenda, the capital of the Northwest province. Initially, only people from this province, led by John Fru Ndi, who eventually became the first chairman of this party, were involved. Seemingly, this choice was strategic because an earlier attempt by Yondo Black, a lawyer, to form a political party with people of various sociological backgrounds, had come to naught. Despite the cover of the law (the 1972 Constitution permitted the formation of political parties), Black and some of his "coconspirators" were arrested. Indeed, administrative officials refused to accept documents presented for its legalization, and six SDF members were killed at the party's launching.

With the international community looking on, the Cameroonian government attributed these six deaths to a stampede. Significantly, the launching of the SDF caused people who had been in opposition to the government to begin to articulate their grievances. The government's response was to introduce *police rule of law*, that is, "the point at which the state, either through impotence or by virtue of a logic internal to all juridical order, is no longer in a position to guarantee by means of order the empirical aims it desires to achieve at all costs."[2]

Ostensibly committed to promoting democracy, the government tried to cover this rule of law by seeking to gain support of provincial elites for the CPDM. As bait, it argued that the allocation of resources for development of the province depended on this identification. Chief Samuel Endeley of Buea even saw this as a moral imperative when he argued that "the challenge to us progressive, forwarding looking, objective and constructive Cameroonians [the motivating subtext in this context being Southwesterners] is to stand steadfastly behind President Biya."[3] Tradition, which retains some of its powers, was even used as blackmail to keep Southwesterners from identifying with the SDF. As a case in point, they were called on to "swear juju" (an oath) that they would not vote for the party and that horrible misfortunes would befall anyone who breached this oath.[4]

Reliance on tradition failed to account for the complicated ways used by Southwesterners in negotiating the present. Variations in this process account for the different and ambivalent responses to this call. On the one hand, there was evidence that the call was heeded, as can be discerned from the visceral reaction of a bereaved mother in Molyko asking that the word *chairman* be deleted from the funeral program of her son. To her, this word connoted the SDF chairman and was, therefore, taboo. Her attitude contrasts with that of those who, to borrow from Vaclav Havel, refuse to "to live a lie." Though opposed to (traditional) authority, they did not want to manifest their opposition for fear of sanctions that could be meted out against them. For example, a worker in the University of Buea who showed me all his SDF membership cards admitted that it was not fear of traditional authority that pushed him "into the closet" but the fear of loosing his job. On the whole, as I have shown elsewhere through the use of biographic sketches, this strategy had a limited payoff even among the elites. Provincial elites continued to adhere to the party and even occupied strategic posts such as secretary-general and first vice president.[5] SDF, therefore, has a standing in the province. However, assessing this presence in the absence of complete membership figures is impossible.

Electoral Visibility and Containment

Results of the various elections since 1992 provide the basis for gauging party support. The SDF has participated in three elections in the Southwest province. In the 1992 presidential elections, of the 198,996 votes cast in the province, John Fru Ndi, the SDF candidate, and Paul Biya, the CPDM candidate, had 87,201 (51.6%) and 36,093 (21.36%) votes, respectively, with other candidates sharing the rest. The SDF, supported by the National Democratic Institute, charged that the election was fraudulent and rigged to favor Biya. The government's hope was to render the SDF invisible in the province. But whatever the case, using only these results as a gauge of identification with the SDF is problematic because Fru Ndi was also endorsed by a group of parties that rallied under the banner of the Union for Change.

Against this backdrop, the results of the January 1996 municipal elections are a more appropriate gauge. Not only were the elections carried out at the level of the municipalities, but they also involved more candidates from all the political parties. Chief Ephraim Inoni, the assistant secretary-general of presidency and CPDM baron in the province, highlighted the number of candidates by pointing out that people

were not voting for "Fru Ndi, Bello Bouba and Paul Biya or any of the party's list in Tiko; they were voting for individuals and not for political parties."[6] Inoni's spin on this argument smacked of sophistry because he failed to point out that individuals belonged to political parties and independent candidates were disallowed from running in the elections. Because the multiplicity of candidates and pertinence of issues must have provoked a high voter turnout, the election was also a good index of political sympathies.

In the 1996 municipal elections the SDF won an absolute majority in 5 of the 27 councils in the province. It also won five seats in the Idenau and Alou councils, where the CPDM had the majority of seats. This number definitely pales in comparison with the 19 council seats won by the CPDM. However, the ruling party's success was inflated because the government created several council areas like those in Bakassi in Ndian division with less than 100 people. Moreover, as in any aggregate analysis, important details are missing. First, it must be noted that the SDF was competing not only against the CPDM and Union Nationale Pour la Démocratie et le Progrès but also against more than 127 other parties existing in Cameroon. Second, voting took place against threats from the incumbent CPDM regime that it would starve all councils won by the opposition with funds. Ambient fear may have caused people in some areas to actually vote for the ruling party. That this rhetoric was not idle could be inferred from the experiences of ministers who lost their positions in the one-party era just because of a low voter turnout in their constituencies. Memory, even if recently informed, was therefore being converted into political consciousness. Third, it does not begin to show that the SDF won all the major councils in urban areas while the CPDM won only in rural areas. News bites captured this succinctly. *The Herald*, as a case in point, said that the "CPDM takes village councils."[7] As the *graffis,* or *allogenes,* were located principally in urban areas, it can be conjectured that their massive presence accounted for the victory of the SDF. By the same token, their absence from the rural areas accounted for the victory of the CPDM.

If true, then this may constitute partial, though not conclusive, evidence that people in this zone heeded the call of their chiefs. Legislative elections held in October 1997 could have confirmed this result. Despite its flaws, as has been the case for all the other elections in Cameroon, the SDF won 3 of the 15 parliamentary seats in the Southwest province. Two of these were in Fako, which has a huge urban population and four seats. Significantly, the SDF also won the lone seat in Lebialem division, which is mostly rural. Its victory in Lebialem was explained by the sociological makeup of the division, which is inhabited by Bangwa people, who are seen as having cultural affinities with graffis. Given the logic that urban areas were safe territories for the SDF, it is anomalous that it lost in Kumba, which is the biggest metropolitan center in the Southwest and is inhabited mostly by graffis. Seen from another perspective, this loss gave the semblance that the popularity of the SDF in the province was on the decline. But what was/is the reality? To ascertain reality, one has to look at the mitigating factors in the election, factors that made identification with the SDF difficult.

Attempts to curb the presence of the SDF in the province have brought to the fore the problem of double articulation in Cameroon's political discourse. On the one hand, CPDM barons are purportedly committed to the politics of national integration. Given this commitment to the "republican model of integration,"[8] Cameroonians are encouraged to settle anywhere and feel at home. Yet, the barons are against assimilation that would vitiate ethnic differences. Mola Njoh Litumbe, chairman of the Liberal Democratic Alliance, succinctly captured this sense when he averred that "national integration would be better achieved, not by the misguided policy of suffocating peace-loving indigenous minorities by an over-zealous immigrant population." Quoting from the *Encyclopedia on Human Rights*, he said that it "should be based on diversity, rather than imposed uniformity, inconsistent with the genuine feelings of the population."[9] Though considered initially just a pious declaration from a private citizen, it was translated into policy when *allogenes* were asked to obtain residence permits. Similar to a pass card, a residence permit was a prerequisite for registration to vote.[10] From a long-term perspective, there is no doubt that this policy had a negative effect on the process of national integration.

Supposedly, this prerequisite was intended to give effect to Article 11 of Law No. 91/020 of December 16, 1991, which pronounced the conditions for election of members of Parliament. While enfranchising all Cameroonians above the age of 20, Article 11 stipulated that they must have resided in their constituency for more than six months. It is noteworthy that this law had been promulgated to guide the conduct of elections in the one-party era rather than during the current competitive context. Though ascertaining the intention of the authorities is difficult, I doubt that in this changed context lawmakers would have condoned this practice of resident permits as a way of introducing differential entry costs to participation. The fact that Nfon Mukete, the paramount chief of the Bafaws, who is also a member of the Central Committee of the CPDM, had to issue these permits robbed the decision of its political innocence.

Disenfranchising the political opponents of this party, an avowed goal of the administration, constituted a form of quiet political struggle. Further proof of this struggle was Governor Peter Ashu Oben's decision that all *allogenes* in the Southwest province without these permits be arrested.[11] Probably an act of political intimidation, this decision was meant to push allogenes without the certificate to opt for invisibility in

public space or to vote with their feet. Fear of political contestation was predicated on the determination of Cameroonians "to live with the truth" that had pushed a reluctant regime to jumpstart the transition to political liberalism. Furthermore, contestation would turn the gaze of the international community on the democratization process in Cameroon, which was already considered problematic. Even granting all the good faith, time constraints made it impossible to issue these certificates to between 20,000 and 25,000 *allogenes* residing in Kumba.

Thus, in the Southwest abuse of this law by administrators bent on removing the SDF from the political topography of the province was rampant. Though no emergency had been declared in the province, the governor liberally applied Law No. 90-47 of December 19, 1990. Per Article 7, he could order "the detention of persons deemed dangerous to public security in any premises including special prison cells" for 15 days. Several people were arbitrarily detained as a result. Pronouncements from the governor demonstrated that these detentions were politically motivated. Notably, he stated: "When I was appointed here as governor, several people said that I killed in the North-West. Now, four years have passed and I have not killed anybody. But the time (elections) has come for me to kill and prove that I am the dreaded administrator who terrorized the North-West." He added: "I have banned tribal meetings which are used by the settlers to make destructive plans. This is also where they sit and contribute money and send to their party leader in Bamenda."[12] The subtext of the message was that a person could be arrested simply for belonging, even if only purportedly, to the SDF. A cursory examination of the list of detainees shows such an association between party membership and detention.

Although none of the detainees was physically eliminated, Oben Ashu, who reportedly detested Northwesterners, threatened families through the continued detention of heads of households. Detention periods for these SDF detainees were regularly "*15 days renewable*," which also became Ashu's nickname. This arbitrary practice was meant to discourage SDF members and sympathizers from political activities. Better still, it could force SDF officials to leave town in the face of state violence. Continuous detention rendered the costs of political activity prohibitive. It took a decision by SDF parliamentarians to stage a sit-in following their swearing-in ceremony in Parliament in June 1997 to secure their release.

Release did not necessarily mean a person's business activities could be resumed. Many political opponents suffered symbolic forms of violence. Cheap Sales, a provision store in Buea, remained closed long after the release of its owner. Conscious that people at the margins had, at best, precarious savings and could not withstand economic pressures, Ashu's arbitrary detentions were meant to blackmail Northwesterners into submission. Those who continued their political activities were bound to suffer from social disharmony at home as spouses berated each other for sacrificing the survival interests of the family on the altar of political beliefs. Those resisting conversion, such as Cheap Sales, suffered immensely. The administrative ban on their economic activities was lifted only when the chairman of the SDF threatened to intervene by coming to Buea. Because his presence would have posed a threat to peace in the area, the administrators reluctantly lifted this ban.

Northwesterners were not the only ones excluded from the political process. *Autochthones* who had any filial relationship with them suffered the same fate. The CPDM elite, who viewed SDF sympathizers as a virus infecting the community, believed the sympathizers could destabilize the political order in the province. Thus, they also had to be excluded. In a classic case, the mother-in-law of John Ngu Foncha, a former vice president of the country and CPDM (he resigned from the latter post and this party), whose Bafaw pedigree could not be doubted, was asked to produce a residence certificate. Attempts to exclude her were spurred mainly by the fact that her daughter is married to a Northwesterner. To a certain extent, this example shows that the construction of ethnicity is dynamic and strategic. Insofar as cultural miscegenation engendered political miscegenation, it had to be discouraged. In one case, I witnessed a mixed couple who had registered to vote on the same day come to collect their voting cards. To their dismay, only the husband, a Southwesterner had been registered on the electoral register. If his marriage to a graffi woman had contaminated the couple's private space, CPDM barons were determined to make sure that this did not spill over into public space.

Members of marginalized classes, dependent on the state for their livelihood, were more vulnerable to its blackmail. "Desalarization," it has been argued, is a resource the state uses to buy obedience and gratitude in the population.[13] Being deprived of one's salary in a stagnating economy is unacceptable because the chances of devising alternative survival strategies are rather slim. It is against this backdrop that the state ordered 12,000 workers of the Cameroon Development Corporation to vote for the CPDM or be sacked.[14] Because most of these workers were graffi, it was believed that they formed part of an invisible discursive community with the SDF. Whatever their political affiliation, the workers were conscious of their bargaining power. Considering their labor as an asset to the corporation, they knew that they could not be dismissed, because massive layoffs would have disrupted production. This was a form of power of the powerless. The realization of this dependent relationship can elicit submission, as well as revolt. In this particular instance, the workers had entered the phase of revolt.

Getting past these hurdles did not guarantee political participation. Because the political purity of the province had to be protected, myriad measures designed to disenfranchise voters belonging to the SDF and its invisible discursive community were put in place and articulated publicly as hate speech. Ostensibly still committed to the national integration but vehemently opposed to assimilation, Dorothy Njeuma asked rhetorically in pidgin English, "If man kam inside your house and want fight you, wetin you go do?" To ensure that the people at the rally gave the right answer, she said that unwelcome strangers should be thrown out.[15] As if to match words with action, people were actually expelled from some areas of the province while the state watched complacently. For example, in Ekondo-Titi, the traditional council expelled a graffi man caught stuffing ballots. Although *autochthones* committing the same crime went unpunished, he could not plead the *tu quoque* principle.[16] Even the threat of physical elimination was mooted as indigenes were asked to dismember the bodies of their victims, probably as a sign of the ultimate power that they possess over the strangers. Sammy Najeme, the MP for Buea, suggested that "our youths, our vanguards to beat up any stranger who does not vote for President Paul Biya. If you see any [of them] coming out of the polling booth, accost him and ask him to show his unused ballot papers. If he has not voted for Paul Biya pluck off his eyes."[17] Foreshadowing the privatization of violence, these measures indicated that the state had seemingly abdicated its monopoly control of legitimate force. Those practicing oppositional politics had to face the forces of private, rather than state, violence, which left little opportunity for recourse to justice.

The threat of violence was real, as evidenced by the formation of the "Mukete Gang" also referred to as the "Kumba Youth Vigilante Committee." According to Mukete's son, who is also president of the CPDM's youth wing, this gang was "Nfon Mukete's personal traditional guard." But enigmatically, its role, as spelled out in a letter to Biya, was "to defend the interests of the minority Bafaws in their native Kumba (by) fighting and checking the SDF settlers whose major achievements in Kumba have been violence, vandalism and intimidation."[18] These terms in the Cameroonian context are contested because those who resort to their practice are the first to accuse others of privileging it. This gang has wreaked havoc with impunity. During the presidential election, for instance, three opposition militants resisting arrest were wounded with machetes and catapults. Although perpetrated in front of forces of law and order, these criminal acts did not elicit any response. Similarly, driven by a mercenary ethos, the gang broke into the store of an SDF councilor and "carried away motor parts while the police looked on unconcerned." Failure to check and contain members of the gang smacked of state acquiescence, giving credence to Antonio Gramsci's contention that commandos, privately armed organizations, are activated in circumstances in which the power of the state is contested.[19] Plausibly, this reign of terror was expected to cause SDF militants to suffer from a rebound effect.

SDF has also been excluded from some parts of the province through the fracturing of space. Barricades have been used to this end, as was the case in the French Revolution. Once the barricades are mounted in public, thugs are recruited to keep due sentinel over them. For instance, in Bokuva, the prime minister's village, an SDF campaign team was barred from entering the village. Ostensibly, this barring occurred because the village "was reserved for the CPDM."[20] Even its poll watchers were not allowed to supervise elections there. Ascertaining the presence of the party in such areas becomes problematic. Supposedly, in Bokuva, nobody voted for the SDF. But the credibility of these results is doubtful for three reasons. First, there were SDF officials and even a councilor in the area. Second, evidence abounds showing that the results had been rigged in favor of the CPDM. For instance, 409 voted in lieu of the 152 who registered.[21] Third, the supposed invisibility of the SDF in such areas was reinforced as a result of virtual reality: Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), the national television, normally carried images of public ceremonies, which never portrayed the actual strength of the party. Though its participation at marching ceremonies was actually negotiated in advance with the administrative officials, this fact was covered over by CRTV. Determined to ignore that the SDF was a mass party, administrators in these negotiations normally restricted the number of its militants participating in these ceremonies by limiting the number of *carrés* (groups of 50 to 100 people) assigned it.

Conclusion

The democratization process in Cameroon has prompted a change in official discourse. Autochthony and allogeny are now emphasized in lieu of national integration. The implications of this policy reversal are significant because *allogenes* are normally denied equal liberty, a form of exclusion, in the political process. Exclusion disables a national imagining among these *allogenes* and promotes a republic of tribes rather than the republican model. That the ruling class does not find this unsettling is attributable to its preoccupation with the will to exercise power. Whatever the ruling party's rhetoric, throughout Cameroon's history power has been the text, fear of the "other" the controlling subtext, with the ultimate fear being the loss of power.

Notes

1. N. Kofele-Kale, "Ethnicity, Regionalism and Political Power: A Post-Mortem of Ahidjo's Cameroon," in Mi-

chael Schatzberg and I.W. Zartman (ed.), *The Political Economy of Cameroon* (New York: Praeger, 1986), p. 77.

2. W. Benjamin as cited in Giorgio Agamben, "The Sovereign Police," in Brian Massumi (ed.), *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), p. 63.
3. *Cameroon Post*, November 12, 1996, p. 2.
4. *Cameroon Post,* May 12, 1997, p. 3.
5. Nantang Jua (forthcoming), "SDF: Connecting with the South-West Province," in M. Kreiger (ed.), *Cameroon's Social Democratic Front: An Opposition Work in Progress, Deadlock or Decline*?
6. *The Herald*, January 25, 1995, pp. 1–2.
7. *The Herald,* January 23, 1996, p. 1.
8. Gerard Noiriel, "Petit histoire de l'intégration à la française" in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2002, p. 4.
9. *The Post*, March 11, 1997, p. 4.
10. Circular L/N G39/02/431/153 from the Préfet of Kumba.
11. Following the arrest of more than 1,500 residents in Mutengene on June 3, 1997, the commanding officer brandished a copy of the governor's order to arrest all nonindigenes, who were transported to police cells in Mutengene, Buea, and Limbe (Victoria). This presaged similar operations that were to be carried out in other towns in the province. See *Cameroon Post*, June 9, 1997, p. 3.
12. Governor Peter Oben Ashu addressing a crisis management meeting of the Fako Elite at the Limbe Council Hall on May 29, 1997. Cited in *The Herald*, June 6, 1997, p. 2.
13. Membe, 1997.
14. *Cameroon Post,* May 12, 1997, p. 1.
15. In other words, "if somebody comes into your castle to fight you, what would you do?" cited in *The Post*, October 10, 1997, p. 2.
16. For further discussion, see Nantang Jua, "Spacialization and Valorization of Identities" (Mimeograph in author's possession, 1999), p. 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Nantang Jua "Can Democracy Travel to Cameroon?" (Mimeograph in author's possession, 1999), p.16
19. Ibid, pp.16–17 for further details.
20. *The Herald*, May 9, 1997, p. 1.
21. *The Herald,* May 19, 1997, p. 1.