Cameroon: Democracy at a Crossroads

By Mbpndah Ajong Laurean

To those who thought that the October 11, 2004 presidential elections in Cameroon were an opportunity to show the rest of the world that significant progress had been made in the democratization process, the deception was simply enormous. For those who bothered to register and were fortunate to have cards, the whole exercise was simply not worth the trouble. As predicted by many, the incumbent Paul Biya - in power since 1982 and backed by the entire state apparatus - emerged victorious with a very large majority.

With a population estimated at about 15 million, it was expected that at least about eight million ought to be of voting age, yet Cameroon could only muster 4.6 million voters, with 3.8 million of those actually casting ballots. Among the various reasons advanced for the low turnout in the face of efforts by public authorities and political parties to get people to register, the most plausible explanation remains a total loss of faith and trust in the electoral system by most Cameroonians. Since Cameroon embarked on its multi-party adventure at the dawn of the 90s, it can boast of hardly any elections which have met internationally or universally acceptable standards.

While militants of the ruling party were celebrating their victory, the opposition, independent personalities and leading moral voices in the country were lamenting the terrible blow suffered by the democratization process. Many opine firmly that it was a total set back for democracy in Cameroon. Observer missions with a sense of dignity and credibility admitted
agreed with the opposition that the registration process was flawed and there was massive disenfranchisement.

Incredibly, the victorious candidate made just three political outings to canvass for votes. President Biya was so confident of his re-election that he began actively campaigning only at the tail end of the race, and he visited just three towns in three Provinces. Then, in this country with its unreliable transportation and telecommunications network, the key actor in the elections, the Minister of Territorial Administration, was somehow able to start announcing results in favour of his own ruling party in barely hours after the close of the polls.

When multi-party politics resurfaced at the beginning of the 90s, the goal of the opposition was change that would be epitomized by the departure of Paul Biya. The opposition was resolute that a Sovereign National Conference was a <i>sine qua non</i> to push the country forward. Probably scared by the nasty experience of Mathieu Kerekou in Benin, who had organized one such conference and then sat helplessly by as he was stripped of all his powers, Biya’s response was a memorable “sans objet,” that is, that a sovereign national conference was uncalled for. Violent demonstrations engulfed virtually all the major towns of the country and the authorities had to use brute military force to quell the dissent and restore calm. Property was destroyed in unquantifiable proportions, and business was stifled. The economy was paralyzed by a very vicious Operation Ghost Towns, called for by the opposition. (Many believe that the effects of that strike are being felt to this day.)

The tripartite talks called in place of the sovereign national conference produced a litany of resolutions, all of which not only failed to satisfy everybody, but also remained largely unimplemented. In the legislative elections of March 1992 (which remain, arguably, the most transparent to date) the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) failed to obtain an absolute majority and had to enter into an alliance with two opposition parties to weather the storm. Then, in the presidential election of October 1992, incumbent Paul Biya, in highly controversial circumstances, emerged victorious with some 39% of total votes cast,
only a few percentage points ahead of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and Union for Change challenger Ni John Fru Ndi. The one-round system bailed Biya out since the total number of votes obtained by all candidates of the opposition outweighed the number of votes he obtained. The repression that ensued was nothing short of barbaric, and will for a long time remain as a very dark moment in the memory of many in Cameroon.

Several years after that initial lurch toward democracy, during the 1996 municipal elections, virtually all the major towns in the country elected opposition candidates, and in a turn of events that many considered bizarre for a supposed democracy, the Head of State and Chairman of the ruling party appointed members of his own party who were destroyed at the polls, to exercise administrative control over the municipal councils won by the opposition. Vigorous protest marches against this only led to bloodshed and the arrest and torture of the opposition’s militants. The government delegates chosen from the ruling party still hold executive power and control the management of municipal councils won by the opposition, especially in the large urban centers.

At the legislative elections of 1997, certain irregularities worked to drastically reduced the opposition representation in parliament. The ruling CPDM party emerged with a crushing majority, which enabled it to stifle any moves by the opposition to push through meaningful reforms. Persistent calls by the opposition SDF for the creation of an independent electoral commission were dismissed with a wave of the hand. It took a radical move of SDF MPs participating in a march to the Presidency for the government to allow for the creation of a National Elections Observatory, a body copied from the Senegalese model but stripped of all meaningful powers. Despite endemic corruption which has twice earned Cameroon the top spot on the list of most corrupt countries published by Transparency International, moves by the opposition to push through the enforcement of a constitutional provision to that compelled state officials to declare their assets before and after taking public office were blocked by the ruling CPDM, which used its majority to oppose the initiative since its militants and officials were among those who indulged in and benefited most from the system.
If there was one election which more than any other pushed Cameroonian into their present state of apathy, it was the legislative and municipal elections of June 30th 2002. The disenfranchisement was in alarming proportions and the human rights abuses very flagrant. Results obtained from the polls were overturned by the Divisional Officers who are all well-known sympathisers of the ruling party. The newly created National Elections Observatory, some of whose members were appointed in violation of the law creating it, failed to make the elections credible. Some of its members were out-rightly incompetent, while others were accomplices in the fraud. Things were further made worse by the inability of the Supreme Court to sit in as the Constitutional Council (created by the 1996 constitution but not functional) to arbitrate litigations with impartiality. Tied to the apron strings of the executive, members of the Supreme Court, most of whom openly showed sympathy to the ruling party, have over the years claimed that their hands are tied. Finally, to make a mockery of the whole exercise, President Paul Biya signed a decree on the morning of June 23 - the day for which the elections were initially scheduled – that pushed them back to June 30. With the country’s appalling communications network, news of the postponement was not received on time and polling went on almost uninterrupted in some areas. The reason for this change was general unpreparedness, and the Minister of the Interior was subsequently sacked. Yet on June 30th what transpired was nothing short of calamitous.

As incredible as it may appear, the Administrative Bench of the Supreme Court didn’t entertain cases from the 2002 municipal elections until 2004, almost midway through the terms of acting municipal authorities. A reelection was called for in some council areas, but the flaws that characterized the election nevertheless sent warning signals to voters of what to expect at the presidential elections. Indeed, those elections were no different. Voter apathy ahead of the presidential elections in 2004 was at its peak and for very understandable reasons. Cameroonian had completely lost faith in the electoral system. They were fatigued from repeatedly registering, yet ending up disenfranchised anyway, voting yet not getting the results. The reluctance of the government to computerize the voting process and empower the structures put in place eroded the people’s confidence even further.
A major development of those presidential elections was the rather complacent attitude of the international community. In the absence of credible monitoring bodies like the National Democratic Institute, whose report and recommendations after their participation at the elections of 1992 were considered damaging by the Government, resort was taken to bring in a group of former American Congressmen to do the job. Another group, the Commonwealth Observer Mission, opined in ambiguous terms that the intention of those who voted was reflected in the results although it noted that there were serious deficits on the content of the electoral list, and widespread disenfranchisement of voters. Among its other recommendations, the Commonwealth Observer Mission repeated the cry of previous observer missions of repute and of leading opposition parties for the creation of a truly Independent Election Management Commission and the distinction of the state from the party.

Meanwhile, the reaction of the Francophonie observer team was overshadowed by the message of congratulations sent to incumbent Paul Biya by French President Jacques Chirac, commending him on his “brilliant” re-election even though all the results had not yet come in and the vote counting commission had barely begun to work. In fact, many were taken aback that, without waiting for the official results to be proclaimed or for litigations to be entertained, the leader of a country expected to serve as a reference for democracy would do that.

The group of former American Congressmen who hardly left the Capital City of Yaounde were full of praise for the elections – this, of course, considering that they were hired at an exorbitant price by the government, a fact reported by all leading newspapers before the congressmen’s arrival. Their leader, Greg Laughlin, said, “At the closing of the poll, we have never seen such a transparent way to show who got the vote. Everyone was able to witness the process.” “In general, the process was free. This is what democracy is about,” declared Ronnie Shows a member of the American delegation. The hard stance that the International
Community takes on electoral malpractices in countries like Zimbabwe was nowhere to be found in Cameroon.

The election equally put to question the moral authority of hitherto respected institutions like the Church. Where as Christian Cardinal Tumi of the Douala Archdiocese has persistently stood his ground in condemning excesses of all sorts perpetrated by the present government, a fraction of the Church hierarchy differed with him this time around. The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church trained some 1,200 observers with some 100 in the Douala Archdiocese. The reports of the observers pointed to widespread irregularities, yet when Cardinal Tumi criticized the polls over Radio France International, the respected International Radio came under fire from the communications minister. Accused of refusing to air the views of those Church leaders who supported the conduct of the polls in preference to those critical of the elections, Radio France International was threatened with court action. The Catholic Church was divided as the views of the President of the National Episcopal Council were at variance with those of the highly respected Archbishop of Douala. With traditional authorities no longer commanding high-level respect because of their involvement in partisan policies for more or less selfish motives, the controversial stance of religious bodies may well herald a deficiency in moral authorities.

**OPPOSITION**

Despite the heavily flawed nature of the electoral system, the opposition parties have proved incapable of forming a united front to combat the incumbent. With over 100 political parties, the ruling party is always likely to have an edge, especially in a single round system. The opposition has in the past failed to capitalize on great opportunities for fostering the democratisation process. In the legislative elections of March 1992, for example, the opposition had a majority in parliament. Yet instead of pulling itself together to use its numerical strength to push through reforms, some of the parties preferred to go into alliance with the ruling party. Then in the presidential elections of October 1992, the combined votes of the three leading opposition parties outweighed those of the CPDM candidate, who
eventually emerged victorious barely two percentage points ahead of his immediate challenger. In 1997, the three leading parties boycotted the presidential elections, yet immediately after the elections one of them opted to join the government. Then, ahead of the October 2004 presidential elections, a group of parties raised hopes by forming a National Coalition for Reconciliation and Reconstruction, similar to the rainbow coalition of Kenya that defeated the party that had been in power since independence. But once again, the hopes of Cameroonians were dashed when squabbles on the choice of what needed to be a messianic and unique candidate led to a very serious split after a year of hard work that had drawn up ambitious programmes and conducted a rather successful nation-wide tour. Instead of a unified front, challenging President Biya were fifteen opposition candidates. Some of them were believed to have been sponsored to create confusion, while others could hardly boast of any structure or supporters outside family ties. Such a fragmented opposition could hardly rescue Cameroonians from their present predicament. The crises within the Social Democratic Front, which is the leading opposition party at the moment, is certainly terrible news for those who see regime change as the most viable alternative..

Despite their large numbers Cameroonians in the Diaspora are yet to be given the opportunity to participate in elections. The agitations of Cameroonians in France, Britain, U.S.A., Belgium etc clearly send a message as to where their vote may go, hence the reluctance to grant them the opportunity to participate in elections as some other budding democracies in Africa do. Though their reaction to the October 2004 elections was coded in very ambiguous diplomatic language, the United States Embassy, the British High Commission, etc., have spared no efforts to see sustainable democracy in Cameroon. For instance, ahead of the presidential elections of 2004, the US embassy organized a series of seminars to empower civil society actors. In partnership with the British and Canadian High Commissions, the Japanese Embassy contributed in the acquisition of transparent ballot boxes - a novelty, though the opposition had for a while been advocating for it.

President Biya, who takes great delight in touting Cameroon as an oasis of peace in a turbulent Central African sub region, has been in power since 1982 when late President
Ahmadou Ahidjo, whose remains are still in exile, voluntarily handed over power to him. If constitutional provisions were to be respected, the present 7-year mandate would be his last, and about year ago some CPDM party hawks mooted the idea of abolishing the constitutional clause which limits presidential mandates to two. Sadly enough, this is one of the few clauses of the 1996 constitution that is operational. Ten years after the constitution was adopted, the bulk of its provisions remain unimplemented. It is under his reign that the once buoyant economy Biya inherited was brought to its knees by a vicious economic crisis coupled with blatantly chronic mismanagement of state resources. Not much has changed in terms of infrastructure; unemployment remains out of control, and corruption is still endemic. With the state owned media under his control, no clear cut differentiation between the state and the ruling party (resources inclusive), the forces of law and order at his beck and call, members of the Elections Observatory appointed by him supposedly on the proposals of political parties, a disappointingly docile and disoriented civil society, a weak judiciary and legislature with a crushing majority for the ruling party, a fragmented opposition with some leaders already manifesting germs of dictatorship, there may be no end in sight for those who yearn for real democracy.

In a paper which contrasted sharply with the initial views of his fellow members of congress who observed the elections of Oct. 11, former New Jersey Congressman Andrew Maguire said there was a time when dictators were dictators and democracy was something else, but today dictators masquerade as democrats using the ballot box as a potent symbol and instrument to prop up corrupt, repressive regimes. Maguire likened the situation in Cameroon to the Ukraine and concluded that if balloting were all that democracy required, both countries might be considered democratic. But there are regimes, the former Congressman believed, which use the façade of democratic stability to secure international approval, advance their diplomacy, and manipulate international lending organizations. According to Maguire, a pretend form of democracy is on the march where ballots are cast and counted, yet they are dictatorships and kleptocracies that strengthen their grip on power.
Considered by many as Africa in miniature, Cameroon has virtually everything and should be force to reckon with in Africa. Its resources are enormous both in material and human terms. If peace has continued to exist, it may well be due to the legendary, biblical, Job-like patience of the people, and it is very risky counting on this. While it will be nice to join the ranks of countries cited as references on democracy in Africa - countries like Benin, Ghana, Mali, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa etc. - the example of the once prosperous giant elephant of Africa (the Ivory Coast, which is now in barely recognizable pieces) and others must continue to signal imminent danger and remind all that genuine democracy is no trivial matter. Just as its presence may lead to a strong prosperous nation with strong institutions, checks and balances, and separation of powers, placing public interest first amongst other very positive fallouts, its absence may push any polity with strong potentials slowly but steadily into chaos and ruin.

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