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Exploring the Politics of Identity and Ethnicity in State Reconstruction in Cameroon

Charles C. Fonchingong

The Cameroon nation thrives on a dicey patchwork of national unity and integration that have become nebulous concepts. Though traceable to the Ahidjo era and adopted by the Biya regime, ethnic jingoism became rife with the re-introduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s. Evidently, the political and economic equation is marked by divide et impera *policies leading to the proliferation and fragmentation of stark ethno-regional cleavages. This article recasts the debates on ethnic hegemony with the political elite occupying centre stage of the discourses and ideologies on regionalism, orchestrated by the phenomenal search for political inclusion. In the process, the state machinery is rendered fluid with ethnocentrism, ethno linguistic regionalism; separatism and the bifurcation of regional groupings and minorities as the order of the day. It is argued that the state reconstruction roadmap hinges,* inter alia*, on devolving greater administrative power to provinces or regions, protecting minority rights; enhancing citizen participation; promoting meritocracy, lessening bureaucratization and fighting endemic corruption; fostering the greater participation of civil society in nation building and the democratization process,* prima facie *for toning down the negative fall-outs of the politics of ethnic divisionism, that has engrossed the polity.*

Introduction: Locating the Identity and Ethnic Problematique

The geographical entity Cameroon was borne out of the erstwhile German colony of Kamerun, which became a United Nations mandated territory after World War I. The colony was splintered to cater for French and British interests against the backdrop of the imperialist compass that ensued. The English-speaking territory, referred to today as Anglophone Cameroon, was administered by the British, while Francophone Cameroon was administered by France. These two separately-administered regions reunified in 1961 to form a two-state federation with two prime ministers, a federal

Charles C. Fonchingong, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent at Canterbury, Cornwallis Building, Canterbury CT2 7NF, UK. Email: cfonchingong@yahoo.com

legislature and a single president (Ngoh, 1999). In 1972, the population voted in a referendum to adopt a new constitution setting up a unitary state to replace the federation. This event, referred to as 'the pacific revolution', turned the tide in Cameroon's chequered colonial history (Stark, 1976; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). The assertion was motivated by the annexing of English-speaking Cameroon in the unitary state by the dominant French-speaking Cameroon. The inequality resulting from the fusion of English and French entities, the spectre and repression of opposing voices—especially leaders and supporters of the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC, founded in 1948), and the ability of the state then to so effectively encapsulate the vulnerabilities of regional fracturing emanating therefrom, constitutes the genesis of ethnicisation, the polarization of communal identities. This study situates the dynamics of the discourse on identity and ethnicity that has become polarised as a result of elite manipulations and scramble for shrinking state resources.

Anyone looking for plausible answers to the thorny question of ethnicity in Cameroon must revisit its historical ellision, multiple agency and regional trends. The total annihilation of the UPC (in the early 1970s), particularly since it embodied much of the spirit of national cohesion and particularly since it did so in a problematic way, constitutes the genesis of Cameroon's ethnic crises. Cameroon was divided along ideological lines at the time of independence. The communist-inspired UPC was in violent revolt against the Ahidjo regime, which was backed by Gaullist France (Ngayap, 1983; Jurg, 1999). As head of the new federal republic, Ahidjo faced the challenge of creating a country, and developing a new national consciousness, among a group of peoples with different colonial experiences, political memories and convictions (Joseph, 1977). Confronted with the task of reducing regional disparities and promoting a harmonious national development, Ahidjo adopted a policy of 'regional equilibrium' (*équilibre regional*) which led to widespread and serial production of local identities in Cameroon (see Monga, 2000 for details of the government policies pursued in line with this stratagem). In sum, access to high state offices was determined by an ethnic equation. Ahidjo's rule was autocratic (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982) and quickly developed the three central features of neopatrimonial rule mentioned by Bratton and Van de Walle (1997): presidentialism, clientelism and the massive redistribution of state resources. Clientelism went hand in hand with the formation of a multi-ethnic ruling class that to this day includes representatives from practically all parts of the country (Le Vine, 1986; Jurg, 1999).

When Ahidjo resigned in 1982, his ethnic agenda was carried on by his successor Paul Biya, who perfected it. It is institutional practice in Cameroon that during elections, high state officials and the well-placed urban elite leave their offices for their respective villages to garner support for the ruling party—Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Those whose constituencies perform well are sure of securing their posts and gaining better appointments while those whose results are dismal subject themselves to the vagaries of the ethnic arithmetic, modulated by the wisdom of the Head of State. Monga (2000) succinctly refers to this logic of 'national integration' as the ethnic alchemy that has characterised socio-political life in

Cameroon since Ahidjo's reign. It is the reason why after the composition of the cabinet after major elections, Cameroonians are keen on analysing the geo-political zoning and ethnic character of the new government put in place. While the ethnic balancing has the advantage of pacifying a highly complex polity, it also entails the obvious disadvantage of waste, mismanagement and economic stagnation (Jurg, 1999). The faultlines have become complex to manage and even the sisterly English-speaking provinces—Northwest and Southwest—have been dragged into the politicisation of ethnicity.

With the benefit of hindsight, Kofele-kale (1981) notes that the fear of grassfielders among south-westerners originates in the long-standing influx of labour to coastal plantations and the success of the Bamileke and Anglophones from North West Province in buying land and taking over prominent businesses in the South West. This perspective is borne by Konings' (1993) work on the political residuals of resettlement dynamics occasioned by the plantation system which emphasized the 'high visibility of ethnic heterogeneity' on the plantations. It is clear that the continuing role of particularistic networks in the recruitment of labourers played an important role in consolidating the divisions that have become so explosive in this area during the democratization process(see Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000, p. 183).

It is the contention of this paper that the revalorization of autochthony politics emerges from the intersection of various factors and contingencies, including state restructuring and privatization, the proliferation of more localized extraversion that state apparatuses face difficulties in managing, intensifying urbanization of national societies, and the significant reorientation of productive relations partially enforced by more global conditionalities amongst others.

Along with the recasting of national politics in apparent ethnic and rural terms, there has been an ever-stronger intertwining of the political and economic spheres (Monga, 2000). In the wake of privatization, businessmen are becoming involved in politics to secure their economic assets while politicians and state officials are using the authority and the perceptions derived from their state position to develop a business portfolio. These elements all with their own singular yet still interrelated trajectories interact to constitute particular profiles of regionalism. The ability of the Biya regime to deploy ethno-regionalism as an effective political tool has much to do with the changing patterns of migration, economic complementarities, trade and resource flows—in other words economic and cultural modalities of articulation—among spaces across Cameroon. The fissures of intensifying structural particularities at more localized levels meet the intentional deployment of factionalization by the state.

Even Anglophone elites have been enmeshed in the vitriolic agenda of the ruling CPDM to deny the existence of an Anglophone problem. By protecting their vested interests, the elites have turned to regionalism as a strategy of consolidating their search for inclusion. In this light, there is a resurgence of identity politics and overt tensions as various groups seek equity, better representation and more access to national resources and opportunities (Eyoh, 1998; Nyamnjoh, 2003). In such

situations, while every national can claim to be a citizen legally, some see themselves or are seen by others to be less authentic nationals or citizens, rooted in their ability to extract benefits from the state machinery.

Parochialism and sectionalism, some of the fall-outs of the fusion of West and East Cameroon marked by the spatial and demographic superiority of the French speaking region, dictates the pace of tribalism and ethnic divisionism in Cameroon's plural society that re-emerged in the 1990s. In the charged political atmosphere, the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone pressure movement, is clamouring either for complete autonomy for the two English speaking provinces of Cameroon or a return to a federated system of government.

Quite apart from this, the voices of dissension and tribalism have penetrated the country's mosaic made up of more than 200 tribes, and over 130 political parties. It is paradoxical that the ethnic and linguistic diversity that should have been Cameroon's greatest asset has backfired to the extent of becoming one of the main obstacles to its development (Ndue, 1996) given the threat it constitutes to national unity and integration. The politicisation of ethnicity which dates back to the one-party era still holds strongly in Cameroon's multiparty dispensation, ushered in the early 1990s. Surprisingly, Cameroon—a country marked by enormous ethnic/regional diversity—has continued to display a remarkable degree of stability compared with other African countries trapped in ethnic cleansing and genocides.

Ideologies like rigour and moralisation (Biya, 1987) and the trilogy of unity, stability and peace, dogmas preached by the ruling CPDM have become mere slogans, highly flawed given the heightened ambience of ethnic consciousness. The political terrain has created vents for ethnic cleavages with potential bearings of national destabilization. It is not uncommon to find an office or ministerial department packed full with indigenes who hail from the same ethnic background as the head of the institution. While it is argued that this serves as a panacea for ethnic identity and solidarity, it is equally antithetical to progress when it becomes distorted and abused. Anglophones have trying times when they go to Yaoundé (the capital city) to chase documents. When you utter a word in English, the obvious response is '*on ne comprend pas l'anglais ici*' (we don't understand English here). In other places, the workers or staff speak mostly the dialect. This example, though simplistic, speaks volumes of the highly charged atmosphere of language, ethnic consciousness and lack of protection of minority rights that has taken hold of the polity.

Occasioned by the retreat of the state and the failure to deliver, the consciousness of ordinary people is regenerated. This consciousness, Ake (2000) may take the form of community, primary groups, social identities, ethnic associations which have been resorted to as self-help schemes to stem the decay of infrastructure, to pool resources for economic ventures and to provide necessary services for the community. Respectable commentators in the field of ethnicity and identity construction (Young, 1976; Kasfir, 1979; Osaghae, 1991; Ihonvbere, 1994; Mamdani, 1996; Nnoli, 1998) have pointed to the fact that individuals can determine by themselves how to handle their identity and ethnicity for positive ends. Such an interpretation is less applicable,

however, to situations where identity and ethnicity are deliberately politicised by a neopatrimonial leader or regime to serve its own purpose. The concept of ethnicity is 'a derivative of the ethnic group marked by objective diacritic like language, culture, territory and political organization' and occurs in situations involving more than one group or identity with a clear 'us' and 'them' differentiation (Osaghae, 1991, p. 44). The added dimension of this study is to situate the politics of identity formation, tribalism and ethnic divisionism as potent forces of national disintegration spearheaded by the political elite.

Cameroon's cultural diversity, instead of serving as a melting pot for state construction, has been used by unscrupulous politicians to foster *divide et impera*. The stalled democratic process has led to a revival of ethnic sentiments. In their diversity, Cameroonians are trying to negotiate a sense of national identity against the backdrop of elite machinations and regionalism (Ngwane, 2002). Research elsewhere (Geschiere & Gugler, 1998) has examined the phenomenon of the eleventh province, the complexity of those trapped at the Francophone/Anglophone frontiers and the attempts to adopt a new self-identity within the logic of incorporation. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000) situate the upsurge of autochthony within the context of globalisation with underpinnings on notions of us/them opposition. Focussing on the tensions within Cameron, they present autochthony and exclusion in relation to national politics. Yenshu (2003) tackles the concept of identity formation and ethnicity in Cameroon from the perspective of historicity at the local, regional and national levels. The present study sheds light on the appropriation of ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference as a modality for reproducing elite hegemony on State instrumentality in a period of compulsory economic and political reform.

The segmentation visible within Cameroonian society has followed a political response to the ethnic factor in most African countries. The identity and ethnic question couched within a more African regional dynamic show new agencies coming to the fore and facing the often-desperate attempts of an older generation of political elites to maintain dominance. The case of Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia; Darfur-Sudan and recently Togo exemplifies this situation. Here, the implicit compromise that has characterised relationships between rulers and ruled in much of the region during the postcolonial period no longer is capable of maintaining a functional semblance of social cohesion within existent nations. The compromise that curtailed political contestation and investment in social development in return for allowing elites from diverse social categories to feed off the accumulation availed to the states pursuing strategies of extraversion has given way to political and economic restructuration mandated as conditionalities for access to needed resources and legitimacy.

Even though former regimes have proved adept at remaking themselves to adapt to new conditions, the increased diversity in the itineraries of political ascension gives rise to new actors, as well as increased levels of social inequality and the normalization of violence in some national contexts as a modality of social recomposition. Governmental effectiveness as Ndue (1999) argues has continuously

declined as a result of parochialization of the public realm and resource allocation by government and other state institutions has typically come to follow ethnic or religious lines. The intensified polarisation of society into sub-national ethnic and sub-ethnic cultures widely separated in terms of identity and loyalty encourages further hostility rather than cooperation (Nnoli, 1980). These linguistic formations prevalent in Cameroon's polity if not well managed can unleash fissiparous tendencies as a broad range of actors become more susceptible to the manipulations of the state.

Politics of Ethnic Cleavages, Exclusionism and Fragmentation

The advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s marked a new dawn in Cameroon's emerging democracy. The euphoria and high expectations associated with the era were soon to become a mirage as the stage was retuned for the politics of ethnicity and regional balance, which is being exploited by venal politicians for parochial interest. The ethnic/regional cleavages have crystallized since the institutionalization of 'autochthonization', 'politics of belonging', or 'the son of the soil' syndrome, following the re-introduction of plural democracy in Cameroon in 1990 and the usage of identities to cultivate system-supporting attitudes (Awasom, 2004, p. 267; Jua, 2004, p. 301). Against the backdrop of state clientelism and patronage politics (Fonchingong, 2004), the political landscape has been reduced to a zero sum game of 'who is in' and 'who is out', thereby opening the floodgates for elites to negotiate identities on behalf of purported collectivities.

Consistent with this drive, Ihonvbere (1994) argues that in a context where the state is absent 'the masses turn to ethnic, religious and philanthropic organisations for hope, leadership, self-expression and support'. Perhaps, this accounts for the bloom in associational and ethnic groupings in Cameroon, in the logic of autochthony politics. The South West Elite Association (SWELA) is the vanguard of South West indigenes while the North West Elite Association (NOWELA) is purportedly protecting the interest of North westerners. The La'kam stands for the ideals of the Bamilekes of the West, while the Essigan represents the interests of the Betis from the South, East and Centre. The SAWA and revitalised Ngondo cater for the interest of Bassas and Doualas. Recently, some elites of the Grand North joined the race to defend the interest of all Northerners (Adamawa, North and Far North provinces), commonly referred to in the Cameroon ethnic/regional register as 'Nordist' (see Monga, 2000 and Awasom, 2004 for further details).

These ethnic cleavages represent different geopolitical interests and are carved along tribal lines. Such ethnic groups (see Otite, 1990) are 'natural groups with ready-made cleavages for man-made conflicts and alliances in a wider state system'. The non-effective control of voices of dissent and ethnic sentiments may lead to the institutionalisation of ethnic hatred and conflicts. These ethno-regional communities have become conduits in regional quests, thirsting for access to state resources. It is legion to note that such regional associations have resonated sharply in the search for

inclusion in the polity. National integration is jeopardized by ethno-regional jingoism, fanned and sustained by the state. People are overtly encouraged to demonstrate stronger loyalties to their ethno-regional or sub-national groups than to the Cameroon nation (Awasom, 2004).

Dominant ethnic groups in government dictate the pace. Along these lines, the Beti hegemony and confiscation of power in Cameroon is phenomenal. The assertion that the Beti belongs to the 'chosen race' in Cameroon was supposedly made by Cardinal Tumi, Archbishop of Douala in an interview granted to *La Paix* newspaper, early September 2003. The Beti occupation of political space was proved right following a survey of senior administrators, the military and other top government functionaries (see *The Messenger* and *La Nouvelle Expression*, 2003 on statistics). In a fierce counter reaction, the Minister of communication, then Jacques Fame Ndongo, refuted all the allegations. In a communiqué entitled 'No state tribalism in Cameroon', broadcast repeatedly over Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) in September 2003, the minister defended the republican character of the state and explained that all appointments and nominations by the Head of State take into account the sociological diversity of Cameroon. Conceivably, the minister was alluding to the ethnic balancing agenda that guides government's policy.

Such trading of accusations has the potential for creating conflicts and a disruption of the state-building project as it may lead to the settling of scores between the various ethnic representations. However, the existence of a multiplicity of tribes within the Cameroon nation as Muna (1993) notes is not necessarily an obstacle neither to national unity nor to development. The growth of ethnic associations in Cameroon cannot be said to be incompatible with the building of a democratic and united nation. Properly harnessed and organized, they could form the basis for original, indigenous development programmes and local government, creating a sounder basis for democracy and putting needed obstacles against the ever present danger of encroaching dictatorship. The ethnic cleavages have proven to be potent forces of self-reliant development and are ambassadors of their individual communities. Some have executed remarkable projects such as the rehabilitation of roads, pipe-borne water supply, community halls, support to health centres, scholarship schemes etc.

However, it is the contention of the author that the sprouting of these seemingly withdrawn identities has the potential for agitation and protest engineered by the 'divide and rule' system in Cameroon as they scramble for scarce state resources. Associational life (Ake, 2000) is booming from the vanishing legitimacy of the state and the withdrawal of identity and loyalty, fear and suspicion and even hostility. The development he notes, is not framing a dialectical unity; it amounts to an exit option, namely, the dissolution of the state. In the circumstances, identities become shaped along ethnic and clannish lines in the search for belonging. Cameroonian politicians are exploiting cultural differences by engaging in political discourses that couch cross-ethnic economic inequalities and social justice in regional terms (Monga, 2000).

Such ethnic affiliations project kith and kin ideologies and affinities. Membership is fashioned along a regional consciousness and the categorisation of non-members as strangers and outsiders. This bifurcation syndrome has marked relations between the two English-speaking provinces that are continually torn apart by the divisive politics of the regime in place. In most towns in the South West Province, non-indigenes are tagged (settlers, *graffis*, and *kam-no-go*). These stereotypes are used for those from the grassfields (Northwest and West) regions of Cameroon. In the major elections since 1990 (1992, 1997, 2002, 2004) non-indigenes were often reminded of their 'stranger' status. With the liberalization of the political landscape in Cameroon, Awasom (2004) notes that it had the undesirable and unforeseen consequence of realigning the citizenry into supporters of the ruling CPDM on the one hand, and opposition forces on the other, and this quickly assumed ethnic postures. The Biya regime, which had evolved and consolidated itself in the one-party context, saw itself threatened by the 'opposition enemies', and started perceiving Cameroonians as either *autochthones*-those who belong (*i.e.* 'insiders') or *allogenes*-those who did not belong (*i.e.* 'outsiders'). The increasing currency of slogans about *autochthones* versus *allogenes* can be seen as marking a new form of ethnicity (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000).

It should be noted that prior to the 2002 twin elections (Municipal and Legislative), the divisional officer overseeing the registration of voters in Buea (provincial capital of the South West Province) blatantly told non-indigenes who complained of lack of voter cards to go and register in their province of origin. Erstwhile Prime Minister of the Republic, Peter Mafany Musonge (who hails from the South West Province) even distinguished his national brethren when he told the former not to let the '*graffis*' (those who hail from the Western grasslands of Cameroon-North West and west Provinces) have any control on the councils in Bakweri land (*The Post, 2002*). One wonders about the scope of his administration and if he is Prime Minister of Cameroon or of a particular tribe. During the 1997 local government elections, one-time Governor of the same Province, Peter Oben Ashu distinguished himself as a propagandist of the politics of belonging. The Governor gave firm instructions that non-indigenes in Kumba, another town of the South west province should produce residence permits before they could vote. The Bamenda *graffis,* generally sympathetic to the opposition SDF, became inescapable targets of the Governor's public campaigns. He presented them as 'land grabbers', 'ingrates', 'bellicose strangers' (see Awasom, 2004, p. 283). This brings to the fore the cross-cutting identity and ethnic question in Cameroon's multiparty democratic dispensation.

The pre and post-election violence that sanctioned the 1992 presidential elections showed the cracks in the state apparatus orchestrated along ethnic lines. The molestation of Anglophones, Bamilekes especially in the South and East Provinces and likewise with some Southerners in the North West is instructive of the instrumentalization of tribalism and regionalism. Many political activists, journalists and students, particularly Anglophones and Bamilekes (Konings, 1996) were arrested

and tortured. Election polling officers who found themselves in predominantly ruling party and opposition strongholds became victims of ethnic conflicts in their efforts to monitor the counting of ballots. Auto-defence networks, thuggery and ethnic militias were a prevalent feature.

After the 2002 twin elections (municipal and parliamentary), three officials of the Social Democratic Front opposition party (SDF) were molested and exiled from their native Ekondo-Titi (south west province) by the indigenous population, under the influence of an elite for spearheading campaigns for the SDF party (see *The Post*, 2002). It is commonplace in Cameroon prior to elections for elite associations, regional groups and ethnic cleavages to get together and indicate their leanings. Such meetings, organized by a handful of top elites, purportedly speak on behalf of their kith and kin. The meetings are usually sanctioned by resolutions and 'motions of support' transmitted to the ruling party and regime in place. Such slogans are given a high coverage on the state media.

Elite, Ethnic Peddling and the Search for Inclusion

The elites play a prominent role in the factionalization and integration of classes and ethnic groups in national politics (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998; Eyoh, 1998; Nyamnjoh, 1999; Monga, 2000). The elite are in the frontlines of ethno-political supremacy by the various ethnic groups and political representations in Cameroon. As Ake (2000) notes, the only way for elites to secure life and property and some freedom is to be in control, or at least, to share in the control of state power. The phenomenon of exclusion and monopoly of power is commonplace in the state paradigm in Cameroon. The government's hand picked elite or barons (Jua, 1991; Van de Walle, 1993) serve as transmission belts between the president and the different ethnic groups.

Thus, every important ethnic group feels represented within the regime and thus able to exercise some influence on government policy. Loyal followers in the ethno-client network (Konings, 1996) are rewarded by appointments and nominations to state offices, access to state resources and rent-seeking opportunities. The extra-ordinary development of political and administrative tribalism is rife. It is a tradition that senior officials upon appointment or nomination seek tribal endorsements from their various villages and regions, a strong reminder of the enthnicisation and regionalism inherent in Cameroon's political landscape. This tribal canonization following high-level appointments put the elite in a political vantage point, as they bargain for the group's share of the national cake.

Political sloganeering and the 'motions of support' syndrome are frameworks under the manipulation of the elite (Fonchingong, 2004; Mbuagbo & Akoko, 2004). This strategy has divided the country into ethnic and regional networks. In the run-up to the 2004 presidential elections, these motions of support and slogans were unceasingly addressed to the head of state and read over the state media. The

resolutions masterminded by the elite-presented promises of the regions' unflinching support to the 'natural candidate' of the CPDM party.

Also embedded in the messages are words of thanks for appointments, either of an 'illustrious son or daughter' as minister or some other high government appointee. It may be of an economic nature to thank the government for the provision of social amenities to the region such as schools, electricity, pipe-borne water, road construction etc. In sum, such memoranda of support are meant to pledge abiding loyalty and to garner support for the regions in favour of the regime in place (Fonchingong, 2004). They are also used to counter anti-state policies by other pressure groups that may not be satisfied with the steering of state matters. This is the state of affairs with the Southern Cameroon's National council (SCNC) that is clamouring for secession. In the circumstance, some Anglophone elites have been manipulated by the state to counter such secessionist tendencies (Konings, 1996). In the process, they dissociate themselves from persons advocating the redress of problems by unconstitutional means, particularly the use of force. In the memorandum, they call on all Cameroonians and those of the North West and South West provinces to declare their unalloyed support and loyalty to President Paul Biya and his New Deal government of stringency, moral rectitude, greater democracy and greater achievements.

In the aftermath of the 2004 presidential elections and with the hope of currying favours, columns in the *Cameroon Tribune* (the government daily) are taken up *inter alia* by the political elite, heads of state corporations and ministries, regional development associations (see the *Cameroon Tribune* of November 2004 for messages of goodwill and support to the head of state). Even traditional rulers and chiefs, who are expected to exercise neutrality, and desist from preaching regionalism, also indulge in demagogy and peddling of ethnic discourses. The heavily-attended South West Chiefs Conference prior to the elections of 30 June 2002 is a good example. The caption 'South West Chiefs declare themselves campaign managers for the CPDM' (see *The Post,* 2002) is instructive of ethno-regional politics in Cameroon.

During the Extraordinary General Assembly of the said conference held in Kumba on 10 June 2002, the President of the Assembly was unequivocal

> Our illustrious son heads the government of the party in power and the fine road down which we have, this morning, travelled to this beautiful school complex is one of the many worthy achievements of his government.

He went further: 'the party in power has always fully [met] the aspirations of our people' (*The Post,* 2002). In one of the dozen resolutions adopted at the meeting by the prominent elite of the Province and the Prime Minister's representative, they called on all 'settlers' whom they said were enjoying the rich natural resources of the Province, to respect and support the interest of their hosts at the polls.

'Settlers' here refers to those of grassfields extraction (North West and West Provinces), indicative of the 'divide and rule' politics and manoeuvring by the state. This has opened vents for antagonism between the two English-speaking provinces.

This stratagem is utilized by the state to let off the steam of the secessionist agenda. Also, at the Chief's conference, the Prime Minister's representative, Elvis Ngolle Ngolle (Minister for Special Duties at the Presidency) did not mince words:

> As you move through the length and breath of this Province in the few days to the elections, bear in mind that the South West Province is faced with a strategic choice: to consolidate the gains that we have achieved through hard work or to lose these and go back to the margins of the national power equation and development. (*The Post*, 2002)

Perhaps the Prime Minister's representative was alluding to the equation to attain politico-economic advantages and competition for scarce resources and positions which comes based on the support of the ethnic group or region to the ruling party—the CPDM. Otite (1995) notes that the lack of government–sponsored amenities often provides grounds for the leading elite to mobilise people for ethnic protests and ethnic clientelism.

In his maiden tour of the North West, erstwhile Minister of Transport, John B. Ndeh had this message for his North West constituency (a province firmly rooted in the ideologies of the SDF opposition party), declaring '*Politics Na Njangi*', 'You robe my back, I robe yours', (CRTV News, August 2002) emphasizing the doctrine that politics is a *quid pro quo* game. To him, the Province is left in the cold because they choose to militate in the opposition SDF which offers no meaningful development. This kind of existential democratic context (Otite, 1995) is hinged at all cost on a spurious majoritarian rule. Emphatically, the hegemonic and ethnic character of the state and rent-seeking elites is captured by Jackson (1987), in his concept of 'quasi states' in post-colonial Africa:

> The state is . . . more a political or primordial-favouring political arrangement than a public-regarding realm. Government is less an agency to provide political goods such as law, order security; justice or welfare and more a fountain of privilege, wealth and power for a small elite who control it . . . Many governments are incapable of enforcing their writ throughout their territory. In more than a few countries . . . some regions have escaped from national control . . . [and the states] are fairly loose patchworks of plural allegiances and identities somewhat reminiscent of medieval Europe. (Jackson, 1987, pp. 527–28)

Ethnocentrism and regionalism is the order of the day in Cameroon's polity. In early 2003, some elites of the grand North Provinces brought to the fore the regional and ethnic character inherent within national politics. Some prominent elites of Northern extraction tabled a memorandum of protest to the government on the decaying and collapsing state of the infrastructure in Northern Cameroon. Issues raised were low enrolment rates, desertification, and lack of roads and bridges. The elite also frowned at the marginalisation of Northerners. In a CPDM counter rally held on 13–14 July 2003 in the Northern Provinces, the authors of the memorandum were tagged unpatriotic individuals, intellectually dishonest fellows, detractors who were preaching regionalism. In the resolutions that sanctioned the meeting, the militants resolved

to stand fully behind President Paul Biya in the forthcoming Presidential election (2004). Dubbed a thanks giving and re-mobilisation tour for the party, placards carried messages like '*Unis et sorde, nous gagnerons avec RDPC*' (United we stand, divided we fall, but we stand to win with the CPDM), Paul Biya is the Unique Candidate for the North' (CRTV News, 15 July 2003; Fonchingong, 2004).

As is traditional, projects such as roads, pipe-borne water and health-care facilities were promised. These self-seeking sectional politicians use sloganeering as a veneer for development and infrastructural provisioning to constituencies that purchase their ideologies. The memorandum presented by the Northerners brought to the limelight the identity and ethnic question in Cameroon. Based on this regionalist protest, the region is prompting state inaction thereby opening the floodgates for other regions to do same. Though the infrastructure is in a decrepit condition, the government took this outburst of regionalism from the North seriously. Since the electoral equation of numbers puts the North in a stronger bargaining position, their elites have been given key appointments to downplay the near absence of basic infrastructure (felt more by the grassroots) and the cry of marginalisation.

The system of reciprocal assimilation of elites (Bayart, 1993), is one of the factors responsible for a self-reproducing thieving ruling class. The elite are seen to be overwhelmingly preoccupied in the sharing of the national cake without any concern for its baking. This is informed by the plundering of vital state resources for vested and sectarian interests. The neo-patrimonial logic of the Cameroonian regime hinges on the laying of a solid foundation for co-opting the various ethno-regional elite factions into the 'hegemonic alliance' (Bayart, 1979) and thus secure a considerable measure of political stability in the post-colonial state. Elites claim that they send 'motions of support' to the President in order to attract development projects and other benefits for their regions. It is also a singular opportunity for them to seek representation in government through appointments and nominations to top state institutions. Let us consider this motion of support from the Tali sub-section of the CPDM party, Manyu division in the South West Province, a region that has suffered dramatically from government neglect.

Political Elite, demagoguery and regionalism

We the militants of Tali Sub-Section of the CPDM party:

- Considering the appointments of our sons and daughters to offices of responsibility.
- Mindful of the maintenance of our roads.
- Mindful of the creation of educational institutions in our Sub-Section.
- Mindful of the creation of health establishments.
- Mindful of the provision of didactic materials free of charge for our schools.
- Mindful of the provision of government services such as the post office and Agricultural Post.

- Mindful of the maintenance of peace and security nation wide.
- Mindful of the government's struggle against HIV/AIDS nation wide.
- Bearing in mind the government policy of good governance.

We firmly stand behind the CPDM party and President Paul Biya as candidate for the 2004 Presidential elections.

Done at Tali	Date: 26th April 2003
Signed: Tabenow Klinsman Tambe	Batuo Robinson Ekpew
Secretary	President.

The memorandum above is instructive of the politicisation of ethnicity by the political elite and a prevalent feature of politics in Cameron. The government is lavished with encomiums for the appointments of persons from particular ethnic groups or regions. Furthermore, the implementation of some development projects takes prime place on the agenda. One wonders if the President and ministers can all come from the over 200 tribes in Cameroon simultaneously. Most regions are thankful to the head of state for appointing their 'illustrious son(s) or daughter(s)'. One is forced to beg these questions: if these appointees are technocrats, are they not in their own right qualified to serve the nation on merit? More so, it is not the responsibility of the state to provide its citizens with basic social amenities? Why should carefully worded slogans accompany such gestures or its anticipation? In sum, it is a strategy employed by the elite for personal aggrandisement. Such appeals and vehicles of regional identity dramatically expose the tensions that belie the multi-cultural surface of Cameroon's fledgling democracy. The intersection of individual, group and national identity can become conflictual if not well managed.

Nnoli (1998) notes that ethnicity is a phenomenon associated with competition, exclusiveness and conflict in relations among ethnic groups which are members of a political community. The governing elite is constituted and perpetuated through this sloganeering mechanism. This political façade is dovetailed by Delancy (1989) who states that the ruling coalition is:

> ... pulled together by several means, including the development of an extensive client/patron system, cooptation and buying off of opposition, the control of appointments and nominations, the strategy of divide and rule, and the skilful use of ethnic balancing or ethnic arithmetic in the appointment process ... (Delancy, 1989, p. 58)

The opposition is outlawed, a single-party state declared, pronouncements that the single party is ethnically inclusive, but in fact keeps power in the hands of minorities. The single party becomes a mask for ethnic domination (Horowitz, 1993).

The Politics of identity and ethnic demagoguery has eaten deep into the political fabric of Cameroon. State manipulations of the electoral process since 1992 have portrayed political parties mostly carved along the lines of ethno-regional constituencies and geo-political zones marked by a high degree of regionalism. The

results of the 2002 twin elections (municipal and parliamentary) showed the ultra dominance of the ruling party (CPDM) in the South, East and Centre provinces traditionally referred to as its bastion, greater presence in the North because of the fizzling out of the National Union for Democracy and Progress party of Maigari Bello Bouba, and a scanty presence in the West, South West and Littoral provinces. The SDF showed its dominance in the English-speaking North West Province and parts of the West, South West and Littoral provinces. The Cameroon Democratic Union of Adamou Ndam Njoya remains strong in Foumban (Bamoun constituency) of the West Province while the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) is very active in Eseka (the birth place of some of the founders) (see detailed results of 2002 elections as declared by the supreme court and published in *Cameroon Tribune,* No. 7643/3932 of 22 July 2002).

Even President Biya could not resist the temptations of the motions of support syndrome and regionalism which is visible in the political landscape. Such calls deify the president as he is referred to in most quarters as the 'natural candidate' for the CPDM party. In the run–up to the 2004 presidential elections, incumbent president Paul Biya relied on motions of support flooding the statehouse and (mostly piloted by urban and rural elites) to declare his candidature as front runner for his party (CRTV news 15 September 2004; *Cameroon Tribune*, 16 September 2004).

Arguably, the ideology of carving constituencies along ethnic lines is clearly demonstrative in the selective establishment and distribution of national identity cards (a prerequisite for registration in elections) by mostly the political elite of the South, East and Centre provinces, which are very loyal to the regime headed by President Biya. This is attributable to elite machinations to blindfold the masses.

The Road Ahead

This study has mapped out the dialectics of identity and ethnicity as destabilizing tendencies inherent in Cameroon's cultural and plural political landscape. The balance sheet shows that ethnicity has gained wide currency with the manipulation of inter-communal identities and inter-provincial differences by the state and political elite to enforce control, which is serving as a framework for fragmentation and disintegration in Cameroon. However, these ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversities are not by definition an impediment to national coherence or inevitably nagging fault lines which a strong state continues incessantly to manage.

What is particularly salient in Cameroon at the moment is that the government is dealing with the potential of violence that seems to lurk not far beneath the surface by an almost ritualistic fear of the social disintegration exemplified by Cote d'Ivoire. This simply compounds a politics of inertia, where the preservation of an image of political stability secured through the regime's highly visible practice of seeming to involve as many actors as possible in matters of policy and decision-making means that few decisions are actually made. The recent increase (late 2004) in ministerial positions to approximately 56 lends credence to this assertion. Everyone thus

becomes convinced that invisible forces are behind any significant endeavour. For most citizens it is not clear how anything happens, and in the rampant expansion of the sense that things are not what they appear to be, there is little confidence in any form of mediation which would enable residents to have a working sense that specific actions they undertake are likely to produce certain results.

It would sound alarmist to conclude that such ethnic groupings and withdrawn social identities cannot be potent forces of development. On the contrary, such social movements are important development paradigms that have provided the where-withal for the mobilisation of local resources towards development in some communities. Such groupings can craft viable economic strategies as they seek for economic incorporation against the backdrop of shrinking state resources. They can also provide a panacea to Cameroon's nascent civil society by checking the excesses of the state. However, one decries the manipulation of these groups by self-seeking urban and rural elite for political and economic aggrandisement, rendering the state apparatus very porous.

Against this backdrop, the Anglophone secessionist movement (SCNC) has been looked at by the state as a pressure group with a linguistic problem instead of as a group representing the legitimate claims of English-speaking Cameroonians. With the manipulation of some Anglophone elite, the state has lent a deaf ear to the Anglophone problem of marginalization. The continuous neglect of these legitimate concerns might have a boomerang effect for national integration and unity *sine qua non* in state construction, re-construction and renewal.

Amid these countervailing forces, the state reconstruction roadmap in Cameroon hinges on fostering greater citizen participation through the decentralisation option. These will enhance citizens' efforts in nation building through local participation and self-reliance in a federal and decentralised structure. The politics of identity and ethnicity would be dampened in such settings. As suggested by Muna (1993), in a multicultural and pluralistic society like Cameroon, it is important that the constitution recognizes the various rights and freedoms but above all it must put into the hands of those that will enjoy these rights and freedoms the power to regulate how they would be enjoyed and the weapons with which to defend those rights if they are denied the citizens.

Engaging all pressure groups, ethnic groupings and political parties in meaningful dialogue remains the most viable option in state reconstruction. The new constitution of Cameroon must be federalist in nature, taking as the first point of reference Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon. Such a constitution must allow each linguistic region first of all to run those aspects that touch and concern the way of life closely connected and attached to its linguistic group. Within these entities, certain rights will be devolved to the provinces (Muna, 1993). The elite would be forced to desist from political sloganeering, demagogy and the state from its ethno-regional networks.

The elite in the new dispensation should indulge in consensus and confidence-building measures towards forging national unity and integration. In sanitizing

identity construction and ethnic hegemony, the reconciliation of the diversity of people, origins, culture, customs and languages inherent in the polity is imperative. The state should revisit its history by taking into account the fragile nature of national unity and the need to harness and promote it. It will permit state actors to share the national cake equitably and rationally in infrastructural provisioning that is encompassing.

Civil society actors like the church, NGOs, trade unions and other professional bodies should be empowered. The state should identify and support civil society actors that are adept in service delivery to the masses. A reinvigorated civil society will check the excesses of the state and minimize the rent-seeking and ethno-regional networks that are threatening the fabric of the state. This is fostered through anti-state practices such as bribery, corruption, tribalism, nepotism, neo-patrimonialism and patronage.

By virtue of the multi-ethnic composition of Cameroon, it should be ingrained in the constitution that those holding high offices within the state structure should not indulge in tribalism. In the context of pluralism in Cameroon's fledgling democracy, it is a prerequisite that those who assume high responsibility of state affairs should exercise neutrality and be above partisan party politics. They should also keep in mind the multiplicity of cultures, customs, origins, historical heritage and languages. Their actions and management of state resources should cater for the supreme interest of the nation. This will downplay the identity and ethnic problem. A federation-styled constitution guaranteeing local level participation remains the key to promoting national integration and protecting vital regional interests. This would depoliticise ethnicity, accommodate cultural diversity, and manage any ethnic conflicts and social dislocations.

Acknowledgements

Charles C. Fonchingong lectures in the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Buea, Cameroon and is currently studying for a Doctorate in Social Policy at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent at Canterbury, United Kingdom. He has published papers in Journals in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, South Africa and the United States of America. His research interests cover aspects of Gender and Community Development, Civil Society and Citizen Participation, Sociology of Development and Social Policy.

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