

# Media and Civil Society in Cameroon

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## Abstract

Interest in the concept of civil society received a boost from the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, as more attention became focused on non-governmental actors. It is not surprising that the concept has engaged the minds of many social scientists. Among the various interpretations are civil society as an "external or inferior state" as "bourgeois state", and as "state per se". In Africa, the concept is a useful tool in explaining some of the development problems that have persisted through the years, especially in the areas of democracy and political communication. In the illustrative case of Cameroon, it is argued that poor professionalization among journalists is a major factor in the media's failure to promote democracy and civil society. The prospects for civil society are dim in Cameroon and many other African countries.

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# Les Médias et la Société Civile au Cameroun

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## Résumé

L'image de la société civile s'est beaucoup améliorée depuis la désintégration du Communisme en Europe Orientale. Au cours du temps, les acteurs non-gouvernementaux jouent des rôles de plus en plus importants dans la détermination des activités civiles. Ce n'est donc pas surprenant de remarquer que bon nombre de spécialistes commencent à montrer un intérêt accru à l'égard des sciences sociales. Parmi les diverses interprétations de ce phénomène on trouve "Etat externe ou inférieur", "Etat bourgeois", "Etat per se".

En Afrique ce concept pourrait s'avérer utile, dans l'explication de quelques-uns des problèmes qui persistent depuis longtemps, notamment dans les domaines de la démocratie et la communication politique. Dans le cas illustratif du Cameroun, Nyamnjoh tâche de démontrer que le manque de professionnalisme, chez les journalistes, constitue une lacune majeure, dans la promotion de la démocratie et la participation de la société civile. Au fait, les perspectives d'avenir de la société civile au Cameroun (comme dans bon nombre d'autres pays africains) sont des plus inquiétantes.

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## **(I) Introduction: Africa and the Notion of Civil Society**

Until the wind of change occasioned by the dissident movements of 1989/91 in Eastern Europe rekindled interest in the term civil society, the concept received little attention from scholarship. This was due, in part, especially in the case of Africa, to the fact that political influence and the lobbying process are more informal and less visible than in developed countries (Chabal, 1986; Grindle and Thomas, 1989). But it is also due to the expanded role of the governments of modern states.

Differences in form notwithstanding, all governments of modern states perform a variety of socio-economic, politico-legal and administrative functions. In principle, the executive and the legislature are expected to formulate and debate policy; the civil service implements government policies and programmes; the judiciary interprets and applies public laws which are enforced by the police; and the military is responsible for defence and security. Besides regulatory functions and the delivery of services, governments are also directly involved in production and investing through public sector undertakings. They also mediate between different classes and interest groups (e.g. between management and labour).

The expanded role of governments of modern states has tended to blur the distinction between civil society and government, thereby giving rise to mistaken notions of civil society which misrepresent the relationships that exist between civil society, the government and the State. An outline of some of these notions will facilitate an understanding of our own view of civil society.

It is appropriate to start with Hegel's view of civil society, since he is the forerunner of what Kossler and Melber (1996) call the "identity theorem of civil society" within the intellectual tradition. In the Hegelian perspective, civil society is a state, it is an 'external', or 'inferior' state. "The state based on need, the state as the understanding envisages it." What is needed for civil society (the inferior state) to become a 'real' state is, according to Hegel, "the existence of a civil service charged with the care of the universal interests of the community ..." (Lancaster, 1962:31-33). This means that civil society is an undeveloped state which becomes developed with the acquisition of a civil service. Once this happens, civil society disappears or becomes synonymous with the state.



In a similar vein, Shils (1991a: 4-9) sees civil society to be "largely the same as bourgeois society" which is geared to the institutional representative framework of the U.S.A in particular "with the market as the main structuring principle". Like Talcott Parsons and in accordance with the Hegelian perspective, Shils (1991b:18) sees "civil society (bourgeois society) as the aim of evolution" which is at the same time congruent with US society. Gramsci (1980:153) similarly asserts that "in actual reality society and the state are identical". This means that there is no difference between civil society and the state.

This view of civil society as a state is indeed very misleading. A state, however defined, is in no way similar to, let alone, the same as civil society. Irrespective of form, all modern states are characterized by their possession of a government, territory, population and a legally constituted and recognized status in international law. Civil society, we believe, refers to those independent and politically active groupings (such as trade unions, religious, professional, cultural and other interest groups) that fall outside the structure of government. The government is, like civil society, a component of the state. Both civil society and the government depend on the territory and population of the state for their existence (organization and functioning).

Neither the government nor civil society nor even both can be said to be the same as the state, for as we have seen, a state has more components beyond government and civil society. Consequently, while we agree with Kossler and Melber (1996:69-72) that civil society denotes "that vital space and network of potentially independent organizations that prove instrumental for the authentic articulation of interests (and) for the airing of conflicting perspectives of societal projects", we take exception to their rejection of notions "that do not reflect civil society in juxtaposition to the state". Civil society is in juxtaposition to the government of a state and not to the state itself.

It is on the basis of the relationship between civil society and government that we are assessing the role of civil society in African politics. We contend that the nature of a state's government determines the political role of its civil society. In an all inclusive autocracy civil society plays little or no overt political role (cf. Havel, 1986:36-122). In an open democratic system civil society becomes a political force to be reckoned with. In the case of Africa,

colonial and post colonial autocratic and authoritarian regimes have been a hindrance to a politically active civil society.

*(a) Politics and Society in Pre-Colonial Africa*

There are generally two competing interpretations of the nature of society and politics in pre-colonial Africa. One is that society was based on developed class structures with authoritarianism and hierarchy forming the basis of traditional rule. The other interpretation is that pre-colonial African societies were communitarian and essentially democratic with extensive consultations, taking place and decisions being reached by consensus (Kunz, 1990). This is an oversimplification though of the nature of politics and society in pre colonial Africa, because neither of the interpretations was universally applicable (Hodder-Williams, 1984).

It matters little, however, whether pre-colonial African societies were communitarian or based on class structures. What concerns us here is the degree of individual freedom and the relationship that existed between the rulers (government) and the governed (civil society). In this respect, we have been told that in spite of variation in governmental form, there existed a rich body of constitutional practices in pre-colonial Africa defined by reciprocity, accountability and a form of political legitimacy by which rulers could be challenged if they transcended established cultural and political norms (Gluckman, 1965). This means that in pre colonial Africa, the political atmosphere was conducive to individual liberties and a politically active civil society. This view is corroborated by other scholars. For instance, Linton (1959:170) has written of African states that "in the thoroughness of their political institutions and in the skill with which social institutions were utilized to lend stability to the political structure, they far exceeded anything in Europe prior to the 16th century". On his part, Boahen (1964:31) tells us that the Songhai empire was very democratic as indicated by "the solidity of its institutions, its political liberties, the purity of its morals, the security of persons, its consideration and compassion towards foreigners, its courtesy towards students and men of learning..." But many of these liberties were soon to disappear with the imposition of colonial rule in Africa.



*(b) Government and Society in Colonial Africa*

Africa came under colonial rule by conquest, though it "was conquered by Africans trained and officered by Europeans and fighting with European arms" (Webster and Boahen, 1970:228). As such, Africans under colonial rule could only be seen, not heard.

Although in some respects the colonial state was modeled on the metropolitan state, essential rights that had been secured by popular struggles within the metropolitan states (e.g. the constitutional guaranteed participation of the general population as equal citizens) were denied in the colonies to the people outside the settler communities. In some cases colonial rule supplanted traditional political institutions by force, whereas in other places pre-colonial systems of rule formed the basis of imperial hegemony, as for instance, in places where the British applied the indirect system of ruling.

Nevertheless, the dominant characteristic of colonial rule was autocracy enforced by repression (Crowed, 1987). At its worst, colonialism was ruthless, tyrannical and denied the racial equality of black and white; at its most enlightened, it was paternalistic and thereby deprived colonial subjects of their inalienable right to manage their own affairs. And be it tyrannical or enlightening colonialism was basically foreign domination, and "foreign domination cannot co-exist with freedom" (Boahen, 1965:146).

To devalue African human dignity, colonialism used the denial of African history to establish the necessity of the 'white man's burden' and to argue that it was advancing the cause of mankind (Markovitz, 1977). Thus the killing of the sense of self-worth of the colonized by all the various instruments of oppression — social, economic, cultural, political military and psychological — the colonial power was the crucial aspect of colonial rule (Fanon, 1968). The practice of distinguishing between citizens and subjects of the 'indigent' system was the most obnoxious aspect of especially, though not exclusively, French colonial policy.

In the system the few Africans who were brainwashed into active support of the 'mission civilatrice' by attaining the moral, cultural and educational standards of the colonizer, became full citizens a black Belgian (*immatricule*), a black Portuguese (*assimilado*) or a black Frenchman (*evolve*). The citizens were saved from all the indignities to which the overwhelming majority of Africans (subjects) were subjected. The indignities included arbitrary arrest

and imprisonment without trial by an administrative officer for two years, compulsory labour, the carrying of a pass, and longer period of military service.

The dictatorial methods and rigid strategies of domination and oppression resulted in the creation of a subordinate culture of obeisance and adaptation to authority without questioning. In this way Africans were turned into objects in order to facilitate their manipulation. They were deprived of that inner tension of men possessed of a critical intelligence by denying them their ability and right to question.

This kind of situation is not conducive to a politically active civil society or what Kossler and Melber (1996:78) call an "ambivalent and undetermined, yet vital space to articulate the issues that a particular society or nation-state is confronted with and to organize around divergent solutions to those problems". By giving no room for divergent views on societal issues, colonialism destroyed pre-colonial civil society in Africa. And in the absence of politically active civil society, the struggle for independence had to take the form of mass mobilizations and long and costly struggles.

As a result of the mass movements against colonialism, constitutional reforms were implemented in the later phase of colonial rule. But these reforms were often meant to stem the rise of racial nationalism, and the installation of regimes which would be strongly averse to maintaining linkages with the former colonial powers (Collier, 1982; Young 1988) — e.g. against the UPCists in Cameroon and against the Mau-Mau in Kenya. The reforms nevertheless facilitated the growth of numerous sectional and class-based organizations such as labour unions, peasant associations, etc., some of which became actively involved in the struggle against colonial rule (Bratton, 1989). But these nascent structures of civil society were stifled soon after colonial rule by the post-colonial state, largely as a result of the autocratic colonial legacy.

### *(c) Civil Society in Post-Colonial Africa*

During the struggle for independence, the nationalist leaders committed themselves to the general principles of social justice and constantly lambasted the injustices, oppressive and autocratic character of colonial rule. Basing themselves on an essentially egalitarian and populist set of premises, they



demanding a more perfect social organization with freedom based upon material equality and a selfless community of citizens.

Consequently, during the first few years of independence, many observers were optimistic about the prospects for enduring democratic rule in Africa (Healey and Robinson, 1992). This view was underpinned not only by the expectations aroused by the allure of self-determination and the credentials of nationalist leaders who had used democratic arguments to press for an end to colonial rule, but also by the fact that in several countries liberal constitutional structures were put in place during the twilight years of colonial rule to facilitate the transfer of power.

But contrary to expectations, the experience of liberal democracy in independent Africa was short-lived. Within a few years of achieving political independence the trend changed in favour of authoritarianism, with the elimination of political competition and the creation of one party states either by constitutional changes or by military take-over. In several countries elected governments eliminated democracy by means of what Diamond (1988) terms 'executive coups'.

A number of factors have been advanced by scholars to explain the rise of authoritarianism in post colonial Africa. These include political insecurity, ethnic divisions, weak political institutions, a shallow sense of nationhood, limited managerial and technical talent, extreme economic dependence, unfulfilled popular expectations and abuse of power by African leaders (Diamond, 1988). On his part Callaghy (1986) thinks that particularistic pressures (sectional and communal), high birth rates, rapid urbanization and expectations of rapid change generated by the ideological and policy declarations of the nationalist leaders are also important contributing factors.

From the perspective of African leaders, the main justification for the rise of authoritarianism in the form of one-party system was the need for national unity (a united front) in order to collectively pursue the overriding objective of economic development. This view is best represented by Nyerere (1961: 197) when he argues that the low economic level of African states required maximum effort and total unity and there was no room for differences or division. "The post-independence period is," according to Nyerere, "our time of emergency, a period comparable to that of a country at war or in the midst of a depression, when all differences are obliterated by a common effort".



It should be noted however, that Nyerere does not believe that a one party system is necessarily undemocratic or authoritarian. He believes that government by discussion which is the essence of the traditional African concept of democracy, is applicable in a one-party system because, as he argues, when a group of 100 equals have sat and talked together until they agreed where to dig a well ('until they agreed' implies that they will have produced many conflicting arguments before they eventually agree) they have practised democracy (Nyerere, 1961: 186).

Whatever its cause or justification, authoritarianism is characterized by the removal of constitutional rights and protection from political opponents, the elimination of institutional checks and balances, the centralization and concentration of state power in presidential offices, the termination of open party politics, the regulation and confinement of political participation usually within the framework of a single ruling party in civilian regimes or the banning of political parties in military regimes, and rigid press control. By its nature, authoritarianism abhors a politically active civil society.

No wonder then that as Healey and Robinson (1992:73) point out, "a pattern of policy driven by societal interests with the state as a more or less neutral arena in which competitive lobbies fight for control of policy resources as in Western polyarchies, is very little in evidence in Africa". As a result, the main focus of ethno-regional interest groups tends to be distribution of services such as health care, education, targeted development funds and civil service recruitment (Rothchild and Foley, 1988). Commercial interests tend to find more direct means of access to relevant persons on the state apparatus (Berg-Schlosser, 1984). In general, people have more capacity to influence policy implementation (through evasion, bending rules, bribing, etc.) than policy formulation.

Nevertheless, there is considerable variation in the degree of institutionalization and richness of civil society in different countries. This is partly because some (though few and small in size) African states such as Botswana, Mauritius and the Gambia managed to distance themselves from authoritarian rule and retained competitive multi-party systems. It is also because historical and cultural factors and the coercive power of a state have an influence on its civil society. For instance, whereas a variety of interest groups including intellectuals, business and professional associations,

students, trade unions and religious organizations have been actively involved in challenging government domination and tyranny in Ghana (Chazan, 1988), the situation in Malawi is different. There, the political space for independent interest group activity is highly circumscribed, and societal discontent is expressed through forms of disengagement from state structures (migration, smuggling) or non-compliance — refusal to market certain crops, declining productivity (Azarya, 1988).

On the whole, however, organized interest groups especially the broad-based ones like trade unions and their input into the political system are still relatively weak in Africa. And although the weakness of civil society in Africa is attributable largely to authoritarian rule, there are nevertheless other contributing factors. Interest groups are seen to lack resources with which to command influence and interact with government (Tordoff, 1984).

Consequently, even if formal democracy in the form of institutional structures is introduced, it may not necessarily give rise to participatory politics. The structures alone cannot replace the material preconditions for effective participation and the formation of long-term organizations with a minimum measure of stability. These preconditions include a minimum measure of material security together with a minimum measure of time that does not need to be devoted to the struggle for bare survival (Kossler and Melber, 1996).

Perhaps the greatest weakness of civil society in Africa lies, as seen by some scholars, in the absence of an independent and robust bourgeoisie (Hyden, 1983; Sandbrook, 1985). The indigenous business class in Africa is viewed to be weak, embryonic and lacking independence because it has usually grown up under the protection and privileged support of the politico-bureaucratic elite. As a result and to the extent that business is organized into interest groups, they seek less to shape broad policy than to have exceptions, modifications, delays or other concessions in the application of policies to their specific firms (Sandbrook, 1985).

A related aspect is that the interests of businesses are heterogeneous and often conflicting, especially as between exporters and companies producing for the home market. They do not seem to know where their own real long-term interests lie (Skalnes, 1989; Callaghy, 1990; Healey and Robinson, 1992). In the absence of common interests, there is no strong urge for concerted action in the form of an organized group. Some scholars take the view that



the low level of interdependence between the peasant or small farmers and the government is an obstacle to an active civil society because it discourages the bargaining process to politics which is a precondition of democracy.

This is due to the fact that the peasant producers do not need the government since they have limited dependence on markets and limited technology and so can and do easily 'exit' from the formal economy and government policies (by means of crop switches, smuggling, migration etc.) rather than voicing their concerns collectively (Hyden, 1983; Bates, 1981). As it concerns industrial workers in Africa, a number of reasons have hindered them from securing effective political representation and participation. These reasons include (a) Ethnic ties and considerations between the small industrial proletariat and the rural dwellers have weakened radical consciousness in favour of tribal feelings; (b) slack urban labour markets due to rising unemployment; (c) repression of dissident labour organizations and co-optation of trade union leaders by governments and; (d) unorganized industrial workers (Mosley et al., 1991).

The suppression of the independence of the press to comment on and criticize government policy, hinders circulation of information and the spread of ideas which would educate citizens on their rights and stimulate the forming of interest groups to fight for and protect those rights. On this we focus in the rest of the paper, drawing our empirical evidence from the Cameroonian experience.

## **(II) State, Media and Civil Society in Cameroon**

In this section, we argue that from independence in 1960 to 1990, the state in Cameroon was more interested in strengthening its grip on all spheres of national life, than in giving civil society a chance to influence government and policy. Like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa (Goulbourne, 1987; Dunn, 1978a, 1978b), the state in Cameroon has spent over thirty years consolidating its supremacy, maximizing personal powers, and centralizing government (Medard, 1978; Etonga, 1980; Bayart, 1980; Bayart, 1985:141–82). In so doing, it has succeeded in dominating virtually all spheres of national life — public and private, often using the media as willing or reluctant allies in the asphyxiation of civil society.

At independence Cameroonians of all walks of life were urged to pool their resources and make nation-building their supreme mission. The media, in view of their enormous potential as magic multipliers of development information, were seen to be of especial importance in this process. Journalists were assigned the role of using their talents and the media to facilitate government's task of explaining its policies to the population with the aim of mobilizing the latter to participate fully in forging national unity, national integration and development. Today, after 37 years at it, one notices a very strengthened state authority co-existing with muffled civil society and weakened bonds of nationhood. What went wrong?

Until democratization was re-engaged in 1990, despite declarations denying "monopoly over speech, reason, feeling or patriotism" (CPDM, 1985:19), successive Cameroon governments maintained rigid control of the media through its Ministries of Information and Culture, and of Territorial Administration. The government acted as though nation-building and development were only attainable through strong central intervention, believing that the best way the media could contribute to the process was through a faithful interpretation and dissemination of government and party policies. When President Biya came to power in 1982, he defined the role of the media in the process of national development to be that "of animation, of orientation and of control" (Eone, 1986:208), a definition echoed and substantiated by subsequent declarations (see CPDM, 1985; Ndongso, 1985; MINFOC, 1987), but one in which the media must take the cue from the government or party. Despite claims to being more democratic, his view was identical to Ahidjo's, who in 1969 invited the media to animate the Cameroonian masses by explaining the government's policies with the aim of winning their active participation in the task of national development. The media, Ahidjo had declared, had the task of opening up the minds of the people to "a just understanding of the problems of the modern world" and to a clear awareness of the role which everyone can and must play in nation-building" (Ahidjo, 1980:919).

However, while doing well to stress the importance of the media as auxiliaries of the government, the latter has traditionally failed to invite the media to render an equal service to the public, which have been understandably desirous of a forum in which to discuss suggestions or alternatives to their leaders' development strategies. The assumption has been that it suffices to



listen to the media for the government's voice, which, if followed without questioning, would bring about socio-economic transformation, political unity or integration, and cultural harmony or renaissance.

The shortcoming of this policy thus lay in the fact that it encouraged a one-dimensional flow of messages from the governing to the governed, and neither provided for feedback, nor for the active participation of the people in determining what the path nation-building should follow. As Bayart (1980) has argued, such centralization left ordinary Cameroonians with very little impact on their "most pressing problems and interests" especially as political, socio-economic and cultural changes they were supposed to help bring about were "planned and carried out entirely without reference" to them.

The basic argument here is that were power not so-centralized, and the distinction between the various levels administration so-blurred, it would have been possible to arrive at more plural policies aimed at serving more plural interests. As Goulbourne observes in general, African governments, by opting to impose unity "from above through ..... repressive state institutions", exclude the very democracy and popular participation vital to "genuine nation building" (1987:35). In Cameroon, instead of leading to the creation of genuine social, economic and political institutions, such imposed unity merely succeeded in creating "pseudo-institutions" that hinder "the process of integration" (Medard, 1987,37-9). The exclusion of civil society under the pretext of national unity meant that "real and substantial differences" (Goulbourne, 1987:35) of the society were left untackled.

#### *(a) Public Media and the Disempowerment of Civil Society*

The public media in Cameroon have been and remain an integral part of the civil service. The government has ensured that media think of themselves more as part of the central administration than as a separate institution and profession. Like other civil servants, state journalists are employed by the government, appointed to positions of responsibility by the President, and given titles that are identical to titles elsewhere in the civil service; as such, they are expected to pay allegiance to the government by respecting the canons of the civil service rather than those of journalism. Until the 1990s, amongst the things which civil servants dared not do was to strike or betray what President Biya termed as "professional deontology" (MINFOC, 1987), which

in terms of the media meant the articulation of anything that might be perceived as dangerous to 'state' security. But like every other, the Cameroonian government was ambiguous about what constituted a breach in state security, perhaps because it had failed to make clear whether or not a threat to the security of the real state invariably constituted one to the formal state.

However, the integration of the public media into the civil service permitted the government to impose certain restrictions on state-employed journalists that hindered the effective practice of their profession. Not only was the civil service insufficiently remunerating, but the practice of journalism in the state-owned media was constantly impaired by political and administrative barriers deliberately set up by government, or simply the inevitable consequences of excessive centralization and bureaucratization. The hierarchy of credibility in such media organizations, which left the making of vital decisions to administrators instead of professionals, impaired rather than facilitated the gathering, processing and dissemination of information for public interest.

The system of rewarding journalists for services rendered was not helpful either, since promotion invariably meant taking up an administrative position and doing more paperwork than active journalism. The danger was that young and upcoming journalists were scarcely opportuned to learn from their professional elders, thus the remarkable absence of a sense of continuity, solidarity or communality of spirit in the public media.

The integration of state-owned media into the civil service was part of the process of political socialization that the government adopted in order to guarantee total loyalty and subservience from state-employed journalists. Accordingly, these journalists had first of all to accept the political system and its ideologies, or at least pretend to do so. Then they could be sure of conducting their mission without endangering themselves or embarrassing government, whose long-standing quest for journalists that were politically in tune with the system and climate had led to an established pattern of selection, training and employment.

Right from independence, government took charge of all national training centres; and examinations for entrance into which centres answered more to political and administrative exigencies, than to those of journalism as a profession. Until the arrival of television in 1985, it was difficult for a journalist to leave school and be asked to start practising straight-away. All budding



broadcasters were entitled to years of orientation after formal training ('stage d' impregnation') at the Ministry of Information and Culture, where they received education from senior journalists turned administrators on what could or could not be done in the system. It was an exercise intended to make journalists used to the "purely political" role which the authorities expected them to play. Once satisfied, the authorities would then allow the initiates to practise. Such orientation exercises used to be encouraged even when the radio stations suffered from chronic staff shortages.

Once in the field, the young broadcasters had to follow laid down rules and regulations aimed at sharpening their instincts for politically delicate or sensitive issues, and at the enhancement of their commitment to the system. Initially, most of them were stunned by the gap between the theories of journalism inculcated at school, and the political demands and administrative constraints that affected their practice (Malam, 1979; Massaga, 1980; Tchienehom, 1980). All material intended for broadcast or publication was to be submitted for prior censorship and approval, not by the conceptual editors, but by administrators, who at best were once active journalists. In the case of broadcasting, studio technicians had the right to reject any such material that did not contain the stamp of approval. The immediate boss was held responsible should his subordinates present anything considered 'subversive' or unpalatable by the powerful, although the government was usually indefinite about the litmus for subversion or unpalatability.

Such vagueness, however, played to the government's favour, providing it with a catch-all net that could afford to be capricious without being totally unjustifiable, and that left many a journalist with no alternative but severe self-censorship. And to show that these rules were more administratively and politically motivated than professionally and journalistically so, the ultimate source of reference on the hierarchy of credibility was the Minister himself. He, for example, had to know well beforehand the headlines of the news of the day; in addition to his role as supreme gatekeeper in times of such political turmoil as the abortive coup d'état of April 1984.

Thus the state-employed journalists found it difficult to reconcile the government's expectations with their professional beliefs, or with the expectations of the Cameroonian public. A predicament which forced many practitioners either to quit the profession entirely, or to opt for a Jackyl-and-Hyde personality. Taking the latter option meant the propagation and defence

of party and government policies, stances, and action in public, while at the same time criticizing or condemning these in private amongst trusted colleagues, friends and relations. By assuming the role of paymaster for all state employees, the government had procured itself an effective weapon for exacting unflinching loyalty and subservience from state-employed journalists.

Understandably, despite the political socialization and repressiveness of the civil service, not many journalists did conform; not everyone employed self-censorship to a level satisfactory to the authorities. Consequently, the government developed additional strategies to streamline recalcitrant and tendentious journalists. These included: the open suppression of information, and sanctions on failure to conform (e.g. transfers, interrogations by the police, suspensions and imprisonment); and were all aimed at driving it home to the journalist that he was better off not as professional journalist, but as government's public relations man. A reasoning very much in tune with President Biya's declaration in February 1987 that if journalists or other civil servants "absolutely insist on total freedom, they are not obliged to remain in public office. But if they do stay, they must accept the post's obligations and constraints" (*Africa Asia*, No. 41, 1987:29). However, while it could be argued that a press journalist who was dissatisfied with the civil service could leave to look for a job with the private press, one with the broadcast media could hardly claim the same choice, given the state monopoly over broadcasting, and the law against private initiative in this domain until December 1990.

Of course, the argument that paying allegiance to the government is the same as doing so to the state and the public whose interests are the government's duty to protect, can always be evoked. But when the government also claims to know these interests better than the people it is there to serve, the argument ceases to pull any weight.

However, with a unified party whose chairman is Head of State and Head of Government, one must confess that it becomes very difficult to distinguish among the government, the party and the state. The state can be embodied in a single individual (Medard, 1978; Goulbourne, 1987), whose dictatorial or authoritarian ways exclude the popular democratic participation essential for nation-building. The fact that broadcasters in Cameroon have tended to talk more of "the government's airwaves" than "the state's airwaves", is an



indication of how as far as they are concerned, the distinction between state and government is more in theory than in practice.

There is no doubt from the above observations that prior to 1990 the state-employed journalists were tuned to consider the party and government as their first priority. Thus while the government interfered with the daily operation of the state media, the general public did not. The absence of equal pressures or interferences from the public not only reinforced government's "monopoly over speech, reason, feeling or patriotism", but also pointed to the fact that the rest of society had been socialized into acquiescence.

### *(b) Private Media and Civil Society in Cameroon*

If the government was able to evacuate pluralism in the public media by making state-employed journalists civil servants, it stifled the private press with draconian press laws. The legal environment wherein the private press operated was very repressive (cf. Nyamnjoh, 1990). Even in the current democratic transition, although certain aspects of the draconian press law of the one-party era were liberalized in the Freedom of Mass Communication law of December 1990, the selective application of the law has been to the detriment of the critical private press, and has made it very difficult for this press to have the freedom and independence it needs in its democratic responsibilities. If one were to judge by the intensity of censorship, the number of seizures, suspensions or bans, the cases of intimidation, invasion or sequestration by the police or military, the level of indifference and hostility to the press by the president and his collaborators, it would be difficult to claim that the December 1990 law has changed much in practice. Whether actually fighting for democracy or simply using it as an ideology, the critical private press has been successful in presenting itself, thanks to the repressive application of the law, as victim of a government unwilling to provide practicable instruments for real democracy. In this way, the critical private press could be said to have contributed in unmasking government's reluctance to undertake a significant and wide-ranging democratization, and to provide for civil society in Cameroon (cf. Nyamnjoh, 1996:61-108).

The private press thus muffled through the selective application of the law, the government finds itself neither with a viable opposition (cf. Nyamnjoh, 1996:17-24) nor with critical media, especially as the CRTV and

*Cameroon Tribune* are under its exclusive control. And what contribution to democratization and civil society by the press is possible in a context where only one voice, only one way of seeing, thinking and doing is tolerated? How can the press play a positive role in the democratization of Cameroon when the law, even in its imperfection, is not applied in a clear, consistent and just manner?

There is little reason for optimism with the abolition of administrative censorship in January 1996 (cf. Law N 96/04 of January 4, 1996), for what the press supposedly gains by this measure, is taken away in the same law by more severe provisions that have enhanced the arbitrary powers of the administrator, and made him even keener to curb than to protect press freedom.

One could thus conclude that in Cameroon the media have for over 36 years been effectively controlled in two ways: the private press is stifled by the repressive press laws and the censorship system, while the official press is forced to adopt self-censorship, by virtue of the fact that they belong to the civil service. On the one hand the administrator is asked to perform the role of censor, to replace the editor of the paper by deciding what should or should not be published; and on the other, the editor is expected to play the role of the administrator, by deciding in favour of what would be palatable to the authorities, and against what is likely to displease them. It is a case of administrator turned editor for the private press, and of media practitioner turned administrator for the official press.

### *(c) Disunity Amongst Journalists and the Disempowerment of Civil Society*

In this section, our basic argument is that, were Cameroonian journalists more organized and professional, they might have acted to curb some of the one-dimensionalisms imposed on them by our monolithic governments uncomfortable with civil society.

To talk of a profession is to talk of a group of people who distinguish themselves through their training and competence to practise a given trade. A profession is like a club: with its members, its by-laws, its values, its attitudes and its ideals. It is going to admit or retain as members only those prepared to respect its vision of things, its rules and regulations, and its approach. Those whose values are different or whose attitudes do not conform will be excluded. One cannot talk of a profession where anyone can do what he likes how he



likes. To talk of a profession is also to talk of solidarity, of team spirit. Given that no profession would normally open its doors to the unqualified, that professions are exclusive, selective and elitist in nature, it is important for members of any given profession to be organized and united in order best to defend their interests, often in the minority and in competition or conflict with other interests. Unity is strength. Thus a profession whose members are disorganized and divided among themselves, is vulnerable to manipulation by both internal and external forces.

To minimize the risk of internal divisions and manipulation from without, to attain high professional standards, in order best to fulfill its responsibilities towards the public and the society, a profession needs a consensus of a code of ethics — that is to say, a minimum of values, of principles or rules, of practices and of common aspiration on which its members are expected to agree. A code of conduct is to a profession what the corner stone is to a building.

In what concerns journalism in Cameroon, this study considers the lack of adequate professional organization, unity and solidarity among journalists, responsible for the failure by the media to play a significant and positive role in the democratization process and in the promotion of civil society. It examines the major causes of the disorganization, disunity, lack of solidarity, and argues in favour of the need for professionalism, organization and unity. A consensus code of conduct would be facilitated by a common professional socialization process; that is, if journalists are made to “see themselves as pursuing shared goals and enjoying relatively full communications and relative unanimity in judging professional matters” (Gareau, 1987:598).

Unlike other professional groups in Cameroon (e.g., Medicine, Law, Architecture, etc.), journalism is the only one whose practitioners have stayed disunited - without a consensual professional association of any kind. Even the Union of Cameroon Journalists (UCJ) created recently in 1996, is yet to find suffrage with all factions in the divided professional landscape of Cameroonian journalism.

What accounts for the lack of adequate organization and unity around a common set of values and interests? The reasons are many, although some of them are more focused upon than others depending on whose diagnosis one takes into account.

Most journalists in the private press, and some in the official media, have in the past blamed on the government the failure by them to come up with professional associations grouping journalists of both the official and private media. They argue that the government has done much to discourage professional solidarity among them. Until 1996 journalists of the state media were not allowed to join or form professional organizations of any kind, even though fellow civil servants in the medical and legal professions had such organizations.

In the private press, the authorities, prior to December 1990 never allowed the creation of a serious association capable of working without interference from them. Government either did everything to thwart the creation of a genuinely free association, or infiltrated its leadership with its cronies. The Cameroon Association of Private Press Journalists for example, was headed by Dominique Fouda, the same person who was President of the government controlled Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC), an arm of the then sole party, the CPDM. As Wongibe remarks (1987:25-6), the two positions were incompatible, and the fact that as President of CTUC Dominique Fouda was remunerated, and that he had a prominent position in the CPDM party, made it difficult for him not to be partial.

According to certain critics, government has traditionally wanted journalists confined to the role of praise-singers, churning out official statements that make headline news while corruption, incompetence, economic mismanagement and human rights abuses go unchecked.

As Chief Bisong Etahoben argued when he was editor of *Cameroon Post*<sup>1</sup>, "afraid that unity within any professional or cultural body could work against its tall walls of oppression and repression, the Ahidjo/Biya governments made it impossible for professionals to come together as one body that could iron out the little controversies among professional colleagues..." The government, in order better to divide, has encouraged the "tendency to distinguish between members of the official and private press to the extent that even socials involving a member of the one side and that of the other can easily be interpreted as an attempt at buying the one to the other's side." The fact that government has been most concerned with the "excesses" of the critical private press, has further strained relations (see *Cameroon Post* N° 104, April 2-9,

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1. See *Cameroon Post* No. 104 April 2-9, 1992, p.4.



1992. p.4) between the official and private media, as most journalists of the official media are afraid "to be seen even entering the offices of private newspapers lest they be thought to be selling official secrets," or suspected of writing against the government under pen names.

Given that unlike their counterparts in the official media, very few journalists in the private press can boast of professional training of any kind in or outside a formal school of journalism,<sup>2</sup> there is a tendency for journalists of the official media to consider themselves professionally superior to their "marginal" or "illiterate" "colleagues" of the private press. Often, accepting that the latter are journalists as well, has been intolerable to some of them who have used the government-controlled Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) and *Cameroon Tribune* to denounce "the excesses" of the private press, their "fake professional brothers".<sup>3</sup> They argue that one does not become a journalist simply because one owns a newspaper or because one writes in a newspaper – an attitude which Dominik Fopoussi qualifies as "snobish" and "megalomaniac".<sup>4</sup> Through his look-down-on or know-best attitude, the official journalist has alienated his private press counterpart instead of attracting him

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2. *The closest most journalists in the private press have got towards receiving professional training of many kind, has been participation at the ten seminar-workshops organized by the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation throughout 1994, on the "Principles and Practices of Print Journalism", at the end of which series certificates of attendance jointly endorsed by the Foundation and by ESSTIC were delivered to some 30 participants. Otherwise "the personnel of the private press is generally handpicked and receive minimal on-the-spot training. Most of the reporters do not have worthy academic, let alone professional qualifications" (Wongibe, 1987:96).*

3. *However, denouncing the private press or lecturing its journalists on the ethics of profession, has not been confined to CRTV or Cameroon Tribune. Even journalists of pro-government private papers have found themselves competent to condemn their "colleagues in mediocrity". In Le Patriote (No. 61 du 31 janvier, 1991, p.3), Jean Mboudou not only lectures his colleagues of the private press on the principles and ethic journalism, but regrets the facts that in Cameroon, journalism to be what people turn to when they have failed everywhere else. As he puts it: It is commonplace in Cameroon for people to turn to journalism when they have failed to make it everywhere else. A practise that makes journalism look like a trade of every Tom, Dick and Harry, easy reserved for former coppersmiths and other rejects of other destiny, who could not make it elsewhere!" See also Le Patriote (No. 73 du juin 1991, p. 12), for B. Ahanda's critical letter to the journalists of the private press.*

4. *Le Messenger No. 260 du 30 avril 1992, p.10.*

to share in his "professional know-how". As Chief Etahoben further remarks, the best way to show how much he knows is for the official journalist "to teach his fellow countrymen whom he knows know little or nothing", and not simply to laugh at them struggling in ignorance.<sup>5</sup> The consequence is that relation between the official media and the private press "are mediocre and replete with suspicion and mutual scorn" (Eona, 1993:3). Thus bringing about what Dominik Fopoussi terms, "a schism amongst people of the same profession."<sup>6</sup>

Some have argued that such differences or antagonistic relationship notwithstanding, it is inadmissible for journalists who are so keen and ready to lecture, ridicule, moralize and criticize others, not to muster the time and courage needed to overcome hurdles and unite themselves through a single, autonomous, professional association of Cameroonian journalists. According to one such journalist, the absence of a professional grouping is much less due to government bottlenecks than because of infighting among journalists, for, "while journalists of the government media are at each other's throats undercutting one another for armchair positions, those of the private press are glued to a battle for survival for the fittest". The tendency to discredit certain units of the profession and to undercut one another, has led to undue rivalry among journalists. Without press centres and clubs, "not even common professional jokes can be shared!"<sup>7</sup>

The lack of such an association has been responsible for the triumph by external (often selfish) pressures over public and professional interests in Cameroonian journalism. And as long as the press continues to postpone defining its own duties and protecting its rights by self-discipline and self-regulation, it would always be hassled by external forces more concerned with thwarting or controlling a press that pries and pricks. As Hilary Kebila Fokum puts it, only by discarding "the cloak of division" and forming "a strong and viable union, can the journalists cease to "be the punching bags of influential personalities."<sup>8</sup>

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5. *Cameroon Post* No. 104, April 2-9, 1992, p.4.

6. Dominik Fopoussi (*Le Messenger* No. 260 du 30 avril 1992, p.10).

7. *Cameroon Post* N° 117, July 117-24, 1992. p.6.

8. *Le Messenger* N° 024 Special Edition, Thursday April 25. 1991. p. 12.



Asunkwan of the Ministry of Communication, agrees with others<sup>9</sup> that journalism in Cameroon is badly lacking in cohesion and team spirit, although he blames this on the quest for stardom: "Everybody is looking for stardom now and everybody is trying to sacrifice the other person in order to be looked upon as the star." He argues that if his ministry has tried in the past to elaborate and impose a code of ethics on the journalists, this was only to fill the gap that the journalists themselves have created by not coming up with one. To him "the journalists in Cameroon ... are scattered as sheep on a hill". They "are a divided and divergent body" because of the quest for stardom and because of excessive individualism and the lack of modesty and continuity.

He laments the fact that in Cameroon journalism remains a profession wherein "there are no elders" and where the young are not prepared to learn from the old hands:

Everybody who comes in knocks his chest and says, well I'm here. In other professions you have respect for the elderly who are in the profession, and they somehow try to guide the youngsters who come into the profession so that there isn't much of a difference. Everybody goes through the same thing and works on to attain the common goals of the profession. But here in Cameroon, that we don't have. And I think this is the point to challenge the people of the profession. The lethargy has been too long.

Asunkwan in deed has a point when he claims the lethargy has been too long, for if under the single-party regime journalists could explain their lack of organization and solidarity by government interference and laws limiting the freedom of association, such an explanation is hardly valid today when the legal barriers against association and organization have been lifted. Keen as they are to blame others for their disunity and disorganization, the journalists have not succeeded, even once, in coming together as members of the same profession to critically self-examine and make resolution and recommendations for professional improvement. Even when organizations interested in having journalists better organized have taken the initiative to invite them for workshops on the matter, attendance has either been poor or the discussion have dwelled more on polemics and external factors than on

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9. See "Cameroon Calling" of 21/02/93.

internal causes. The Union of Cameroon Journalists (UCJ), the result of a Friedrich-Ebert Foundation initiative after many similar abortive attempts, is yet to heal the differences that plague Cameroonian journalism and be seen as a veritable union by the majority of journalists in the public and private media.

Some journalists keen to have a united press, argue that the freedom currently enjoyed by the Cameroonian press, even if only token, is much more the fruit of the collective struggle for change by the Cameroonian people, than because the journalists, as such, have fought for it. Having thus failed to earn their own freedom, it is only normal for them to unite in order best to protect and foster society's hard earned freedoms.

With the on-going struggle for democracy, attempts have been made to form professional associations. Currently, there exist associations, but these are either specialized (e.g. National Association of Professional Media Women (NAPMEW), Association des Journalistes Economiques du Cameroun (AJEC)) or (seen to be) founded along regional or linguistic lines (e.g. Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists (CAMASEJ) and Federation of Cameroon Media Professionals (FCMP) of the North-West Province), or still too young for the full impact to be felt (e.g. Union of Cameroon Journalists (UCJ)). As for the Organization Camerounaise pour la Liberte de Presse (OCALIP), this is not, strictly speaking, an association of journalists. Even if most of its members are journalists, OCALIP is open to all with an interest in promoting press freedom, democracy and human rights in Cameroon. Others such as the Cameroon Anglophone Journalists Association (CAJA) created in May 1992,<sup>10</sup> hardly survived their first meeting. It is for the journalists to determine whether unity would best be attained through specialized associations of which the best working example for now is AJEC, or through the UJC whose membership is open to all journalists. The organizational experiences of relatively successful associations elsewhere in Africa (e.g. Nigeria), could be drawn from at the initial stage.

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10. See *Cameroon Post*, No 110 May 27, 1992, p.7.



Whether one blames the government, the quest for stardom, individualism, or the superiority complex of some and the inferiority complex of others, for the lack of unity among Cameroonian journalists, Michel Epee<sup>11</sup> has no doubt that divisions within the ranks of the profession, have brought about a catalogue of problems, and made journalists particularly vulnerable to manipulating forces in the political arena, during the on-going democratic process:

.... the manichean movement which resulted from the democratization process created many misunderstandings between men and women who are supposed to share the same ideals. While public service journalists - no doubt, for fear of losing their jobs, or as a reflex of identifying with the powers that be — were taking up the cudgels for the Etoudi palace, those of the private Press were 'prisoners' of the opposition, since they thought they shared the same values.

But because real democracy can only exist with a truly free press, Michel Epee<sup>12</sup> urges members of the profession to:

... get themselves organized rapidly and put an end to the rancours that have been transformed into settling of scores, to simply become a homogenous corps, the ultimate defence against misuse of authority, violations of the most fundamental civic rights. For the still toddling Cameroon democracy to thrive, impartiality, independence and professionalism should be their only credo.

Such honesty, accuracy, fairness and professionalism, should, as Patavier Walikuzu points out,<sup>13</sup> be respected in practice "whatever the political stance of a particular journal" or "the individual's personal affections". The press should be such that it has no permanent friends nor permanent enemies, and that is best achieved through a strong, principled and active union or association.

Thus as Mayer has observed of the West, and this is applicable to Cameroon and the rest of Africa just as well, to be able to perform the vital role as defenders of democracy and liberty and as watch-dogs for the

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11. *Le Messenger* No 254 du 19 mars 1992, p.12.

12. *Le Messenger* No 254 du 19 mars 1992, p.12.

13. *The Guardian* No 0002, December 21, 1991, p.3.

community, "journalists as individual persons need a framework of laws and collective agreements which concretely and in detail guarantee the conditions to fulfill their task and to work under reasonable terms" (Mayer, 1993:56). Only as a body united in values and aspirations, can journalists "ensure that exceptions to the right to information are kept at a minimum and cannot be misused to hide information of public interest" (Mayer, 1993:58). Thus organized, strong and united in their values, interests and aspirations, journalists would be in a position to defend their professional interests and determine their role as a body in the democratization of society, and not simply be pawns in the hands of external (political, economic and cultural) forces, that may or may not have the democratic aspirations of society at heart.

### **(III) Conclusion: What Prospects for Civil Society in Africa?**

In the light of the above considerations, one may ask just what prospects are there for participatory democracy and an active civil society in Cameroon and Africa? It is true that political liberalization is well under way in Cameroon and a number of African countries, but there is no certainty over its future direction and impact on the underlying political structure. There is doubt about the true extent and likely beneficiaries of political reform, because in the absence of political culture of participation and accountability, multi-party democracy is likely to remain confined to competition among political elites to the exclusion of the masses (Nyong'o, 1988).

In Cameroon, the one party logic has prevented multi-partyism from addressing the real issue: how best to bring about meaningful participatory democracy. The momentum and enthusiasm for change generated with the rebirth of multi-partyism petered out shortly after the first multi-party presidential elections in October 1992, when the public learnt that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants. Today the bulk of Cameroonians, despite multi-partyism, continue to be compelled to abide by decisions taken without their consent or participation. They continue to have little impact even on their most pressing problems and interests, as the political, economic and social changes that they yearn for are being planned, executed or thwarted according to the one-best-way logic of the one-party era. It is a case of recycled monolithism, of pseudo or parceled democracy, of democracy by remote control (cf. Nyamnjoh, 1996: 17-24).



Enfranchisement does not necessarily lead to empowerment and universal suffrage does not guarantee access to political decision making. In the absence of a vigorous private sector, African political leaders continue to perceive the state as the sole source of personal enrichment and reward. They are prone to use political power for private ends or what Hodder-Williams, (1984) terms an "extractive view of politics". As such they are reluctant to be committed to genuine democratic change and hence their refusal to accept defeat and hand over power even when beaten at the polls, with very few exceptions. Thus, contemporary manifestations of political liberalization is in the case of most African countries cosmetic reforms designed to please outsiders and to ensure the continued dominance of authoritarian leaders in the face of popular discontent. And so even on the eve of the 21st century, we still wonder with Ayi Kwei Armah (1969:79), for "how long will Africa be cursed with its leaders?"

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