

Civil society and democratization: the Cameroonian experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to identify a new orientation for civil society in a Cameroon dangling on the eaves of democratic transition. It points to civil society's current deficiencies in its efforts to assert itself successfully as an important and central player in effecting political and social change. This is blamed on government's unwillingness to introduce genuine democratic reforms because anti-democratic forces remain strong and on the lack of political organization and effective mobilization of civil society movements themselves, due in part to parochialism expressed in the form of ethnicism and regionalism. It outlines the potential of civil society by drawing inspiration from the activities of some civil society organizations like the Church and concludes that an integration of traditional social structures such as kinship associations and a revamping of the objectives of civil society could constitute a springboard for popular participation. This could usher in a sustainable democratic transition process in Cameroon.

KEYWORDS

civil society, democratization, ethnicity, governance, human rights, media

Background

The end of the twentieth century witnessed an increase in the debate over the role citizens could play in the struggle to construct viable and sustainable democracies in sub Saharan Africa. This new urgency, coming in the wake of the massive failure by totalitarian regimes to ensure minimal social, economic and political resources for most of their citizens

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and the deepening crisis of underdevelopment, have increased pressure—both internal and external—on states to democratize. More especially, the question has revolved around what strategies, options and forces could be harnessed to promote a democratic transition within internationally recognized norms, while taking into consideration the local history and the political and economic peculiarities of the state or region. In response to these concerns a new consensus has emerged in the international community on the importance of citizens and citizens' movements to nurture institutions and practices that are conducive to the establishment of viable democratic institutions and traditions

In a country like Cameroon, which is still struggling to emerge from the vestiges of one-party rule, the challenge to civil society is to create an awareness in citizens that will encourage them to take responsibility for their individual and collective destiny. The individual and collective liberties that are enshrined in the letter and spirit of the national Constitution have not yet been brought out of the pages of documents and given practical expression. Civil society is increasingly being identified as an invaluable player in creating and fostering a new democratic ethos and the present system of governance, which could be described as a Constitution without constitutionalism, can be redressed with the help of a strong, vibrant and empowered civil society.

Civil society should be broadly understood as the domain of non-kinship based contractual relations comprising non-governmental organizations, professional associations, interest groups, such as credit and development associations which exist independently of the state's sovereign bailiwick, but at the same time are capable of bringing pressure to bear on the state. For Carothers (2000) "civil society helps advance democracy, discipline the state, ensure that citizens interest are taken seriously, foster greater civil and political participation". In a similar vein, Fatton Jr. (1995) conceives of civil society as a critical element of democratization and argues that the current failure of the process of democratization in Africa hinges, in part, on the failure of states to respond to the pressing demands of their people. Popular frustration with this state of affairs is sometimes expressed through mass political defiance such as strikes and protest marches. In Cameroon mass political rallies

and protest marches have frequently gone ahead in defiance of banning orders from over-zealous local level administrative officers backed by trigger-happy policemen.

Civil society is concerned with a gamut of themes. These include the environment, human rights, women's issues, election monitoring, anti-corruption crusades and so on. To attain these goals, civil society has the responsibility to construct institutions that defend basic individual and community rights and, to do so, citizens must see themselves as active participants in the construction of this liberty. According to Galston (1997) this requires broad-based dialogue among citizens and collective action to get rid of dictators and dictatorship.

In a study of political transitions in Africa, Osaghae (1995) says that civil society, consisting of the "non-statist organizations that occupy the political and social space between the individual and the state", has historically functioned to limit the power of the state. To achieve this and to arrive at various indices of democracy such as accountability, civil society should have the capacity to "check the transition process from backsliding". In other words, the momentum for the struggle to build a strong democracy should be kept up as long as certain individuals and groups are denied their basic rights. In the view of Hyden (1995) such forces should be kept fully alive until the disenfranchised segments of the population become incorporated in the democratic train.

The potential of civil society in Cameroon has not yet been fully evaluated, however, and Yenshu (2001) has raised the question as to whether talk about the role civil society could play in promoting democracy is only a matter of ideological conviction, given its current inability to influence democratic governance significantly. The relevance of this question lies in the discrepancy between the large numbers of civil society groups and associations that exist currently and their perceived and actual impact on the democratization process. In Cameroon this is yet to be determined.

The bumpy road towards democratic transition

A consideration of the impact of civil society on the decade-old democratic transition process in Cameroon indicates the bumpy nature

of its life course. On the downside, the civil society movement has demonstrated its limits as a viable guarantor of the rights and liberties of ordinary men and women. These restrictions can be blamed, in part, on government's reluctance to liberalize effectively national political life because those with a vested interest in the regime are intent on maintaining the *status quo*. They can also be attributed to the poor organization of civil society organizations arising from their own internal contradictions; contradictions that are largely fuelled by the state. Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997) argue that the government's introduction of a measure of political liberalization in 1990 was not without pressures from within and without. The extent of this openness is questionable because of widely reported incidences of human rights abuses within the country. The chairman of the government's own human rights organization, the National Commission on Human Rights, points to the rampant violation of human rights and the fact that these abuses continue unabated, despite all efforts to stop them. He says "the situation of human rights in our country today leaves much to be desired" (*Freedom Forum* 2001).

In this atmosphere, where basic rights are denied citizens, civil society has failed to mobilize itself for a more democratic social and political order. It has fallen prey to what Nyamnjoh (1999) describes as the politics of regional and ethnic balance. By awarding juicy positions and government contracts to élites and by making them actually compete for these positions and contracts, élites from different regions perceive one another either as their potential or their actual rivals. This has helped to stall the democratic process and heighten individual and regional interests and civil society is incapable of coming up with viable alternatives to the current system of governance that includes a number of relics of the erstwhile one-party state, namely, its institutions, laws and political practices. The image portrayed of the president of the Republic as a super-leader who exhibits unquestionable magnanimity by doling out gifts, including "democracy", to Cameroonians, is still a perennial feature on the state-controlled Cameroon radio and television. Such features only indicate the reluctance by the regime to liberalize the media fully and enter the highway of genuine participatory democracy.

The example of the media's inability to rise above sectarian politics in Cameroon and to serve as a catalyst in efforts to build a genuine democratic culture is illustrative of this trend.

a) The case of the media

The national press is yet to become a real force in efforts to build a more democratic society because of contradictions arising from the exploitation of the press for personal and ethnic ends by certain segments of the population. This has torpedoed the development of genuine democratic institutions in Cameroon. Ethnic and sectional loyalties and the attachment of these writers to their own place of origin are in a large measure responsible for the failure of the press to crystallize into a real watchdog of and spokesman for the democratic aspirations of Cameroonians. Rather than censoring the actions of the government and those groups that are judged hostile to the welfare of citizens, no matter from what part of the country they come, the press has degenerated into a theatre of ideological warfare in which people and groups are criticized and labelled, not so much for their social actions, as for where they come from and what political inclinations they express. This tribalization and sectionalization of the media has led to the evolution of extra-professional considerations in reporting and interpreting news events, depending on which part of the country the reporter or owner of the press organ comes.

As a result, instead of serving the interest of Cameroonians, the press has assumed a highly partisan role, dividing citizens along tribal cum political lines. As Nyamnjoh (1997) demonstrates, sectarian tendencies are reproduced in the media and the media's democratic objectives have been jettisoned in favour of more parochial considerations, such as the desire to share in the spoils of office. National political issues and debates are articulated in a highly parochial manner, as the chief editor in the *Cameroon Post* (1992, in Nyamnjoh 1997) admits:

One thing only the most dishonest journalist can refute about the political coverage of events in this country so far is the fact that journalists have not exhibited that much professional probity. And

I don't exclude myself from this accusation.... We have allowed ourselves to be swept away by our clannish, regional and, sadly enough, even linguistic leanings to the extent that we see no news when it concerns the other side.

Ndembiyembe (1997) corroborates this assertion, declaring that the press has of late provided the impetus to ethnic divisions in Cameroon:

A celle s'ajoute donc le développement d'une presse liée bien à la tribu qu'à la formation politique. Les particularismes sont ainsi magnifiés et défendus ... On ne défend plus des idées ou une idéologie. On défend la tribu à travers le parti politique et à travers la presse qui lui est fidèle.

This politicization and factionalization in the media, with respect to supporting efforts to build a viable democratic tradition, is shown by its failure to galvanize all citizens towards the highway of democracy. The role of informing and educating the public has been replaced by one aimed at disinforming them and caricaturing social realities to undermine democracy and popular participation.

One example concerns reportage of the 1998 suspension of a charismatic catholic priest from the Buea Diocese by the Bishop of that diocese for alleged anti-Catholicism and failing to respect the religious hierarchy. This event saw the press splintered along regional cum ideological lines. For example, the *Star Headlines*, a local newspaper based in Limbe in the South West Province of Cameroon, was generally supportive of suspended Rev. Fr. Etienne, in opposition to the actions of Bishop Pius Awa, who comes from the North West Province, whom the paper describes as the "grassfield Bishop" and a "devil in cassock" and who has all along been a stumbling block on the progress of most south westerners (*Star Headlines* 1998). The newspaper editor, it should be said, comes from the same division (ethnic group) and province as the sanctioned Rev. Father. The paper, however, did not demonstrate the rationality and basis of its accusations. It simply ballooned out of the norms of proper journalism and fanned the flames of the long-running north-west and south-west political and social divide by injecting

indiscriminate doses of ethnicity and regionalism into a crisis that began primarily as a religious quarrel between Bishop Pius Awa and Fr. Etienne. The traditional political and social divide between these two provinces, the North West and South West, has become a perennial feature in the politics of regionalism in Cameroon and a stock-in-trade by élites of both provinces, who exploit it for sectional and personal ends (Nkwi and Socpa 1997). The press, it would seem, has fallen prey to this divide.

The *Cameroon Panorama*, a Catholic-owned newsletter, on the other side of the conflict, was generally critical of the actions of the “rebel” priest, and criticized other press organs which saw the event differently. It accused other newspapers of “bias” and being “anti-church” and said that the press had abused its freedom of expression by encouraging a campaign of calculated deviance by a priest against his Bishop “in a manner reckless, completely out of proportion and without the accurate investigation required by the norms of informed journalism” (*Cameroon Panorama* 1999). Though not reflecting regional tendencies, the *Panorama* also sinned against the norms of journalism. In trying to protect the Catholic Church, it saw no merit whatever in the actions of the “rebel” priest and was decidedly one-sided in reporting the events surrounding the controversy between the bishop and the priest. This polarization of the media and lack of respect for the ethics of journalism only weakens the democratic option embarked upon since the liberalization of the press, following the re-introduction of multiparty politics more than a decade ago. It shows its inability to build a consensus as to what represent the norms of proper journalism in Cameroon.

These internal contradictions lead one to agree with Fatton Jr. (1995:72–77) that the civil society does not embody a coherent social project for, by its very nature, it is a plurality exhibiting “contradictory historical processes of competing social actors”. In Cameroon civil society has degenerated into dissenting factions, with none offering a clear, coherent and consistent blueprint of the type of societal project it envisages for Cameroonians. But such contradictions could offer advantages, if well managed and channelled towards a positive direction. This could come about through sincere debates and the emergence of consensus among the various segments of civil society and could serve

as both a foundation and as building blocks for encouraging a democratic mentality in Cameroonians. There is a creative potential that arises from contesting and competing political, ideological and scientific perspectives: this has historically been the engine for positive social action in other countries. While all sectors can claim their mutual independence, there could be a cross-fertilization of mutually beneficial ideas between the different elements of civil society. Such ideas could be inspired and instructed by the desire to build a strong and self-sustaining democratic culture on the basis of Cameroon's cultural and historical peculiarities.

In spite of these shortcomings, civil society can still play a valuable role in forging democracy and participatory governance in Cameroon. The efforts deployed by the Church in this domain is illuminating and offers a glimmer of hope. The Church has thrown its full weight behind the efforts of Cameroonians of goodwill by drawing the attention of the state to gross human rights abuses, crushing poverty, bribery and corruption, electoral fraud and the tribalism that characterize the state and Cameroonians today. Through Pastoral Letters addressed to the government and the public, interviews in journals and newspapers by some members of the clergy and critical articles in church-owned newsletters, the Church has intervened by expressing its concern on different political, social and economic crises that mar the image of Cameroon as a country.

b) The case of the Catholic Church

The problem of political realism formulated by Machiavelli was revisited by the Bishops of Cameroon in an attempt to draw the attention of leaders, citizens and the state to the fact that politics and morality, contrary to the view of Machiavelli, are not mutually exclusive. In their open letter to all Cameroonians (Pastoral Letter, 2000), the Bishops insist on the fact that being in authority or in high office does not imply moral and legal immunity to the laws of the state, saying that this attitude contradicts the very idea of statehood. As a consequence of this disregard for morals, many violations of human rights have been recorded.

An editorial in the *Cameroon Panorama* illustrates how easily human rights are violated because of the existence of laws which are not precise and are thus vulnerable to false interpretations by local administrative and political authorities for their own benefit, against the interest of precisely those whom the laws were meant to protect. For example, a 1999 law quoted by the United States State Department Human Rights Report “permits detention without charge by administrative authorities for renewable periods of 15 days, ostensibly in order to combat banditry and maintain public order”.

This law explains why it was only after two years in detention that some 65 Anglophones (English-speaking Cameroonians; the majority being French-speaking) were tried in court. They had been arrested and accused in March 1997 of participating in armed attacks against government installations in the North West Province. The prosecution was unable to produce eyewitnesses who could link each of the accused to the alleged crimes and those who did appear offered contradictory testimony. In October 1999 a military tribunal in Yaounde convicted 37 of the accused, sentencing three to life imprisonment and 34 to terms ranging from one to 20 years. The tribunal acquitted 28 defendants, some of whom had been detained for 30 months, during which at least eight of the persons originally arrested in this case died in custody as a result of the torture inflicted on many of them (*Cameroon Panorama* 2000).

In the same vein, and in an effort to fight growing insecurity stemming mainly from poverty and unemployment, an operational command force was created at the beginning of the year 2000 by the government. Many extra-judicial killings by this élite force were reported (*Nouvelle Expression* 2001). These killings became famous with the disappearance of nine youths from the Bepanda neighbourhood, one of the residential quarters in the city of Douala. This particular incident was later called the “Bepanda Affair”. The role of the Catholic Church in drawing up support for the nine and its condemnation of the Operational Command Force for their alleged involvement was led by Cardinal Christian Tumi of the Douala Diocese. Described by some as “Le Cardinal rebel” he firmly condemned these extra-judicial killings perpetrated by the

government through the Operational Command. In a letter (*Jeune Afrique Economie* 2000) addressed to the Governor of the Littoral Province, he writes: "Depuis la mise en place du Commandement Operationnel, de nombreux cas de tortures, de blessures graves et d'assassinats sont signalés sur des victimes innocents ou peut-être coupables, mais exécutés sans jugement ...".

On account of these statements, the government reacted: firstly, through the Governor of the Littoral Province, who accused the Cardinal of supporting criminals. Then the Minister of Territorial Administration, Ferdinand Koungo Edima, also accused the Cardinal of harbouring presidential ambitions (*Cameroon Panorama* 2001a). A military captain accused the Cardinal of being in league with the Social Democratic Front, a frontline opposition party, to import arms into the country. He claimed the arms were brought in "to increase organized crime, cause riots and thus chase [away] president Paul Biya" (*The Post* 2001).

These allegations simply portray the efforts by the government to discredit the Cardinal's crusade for a society that respects human rights and the rule of law. The fight for this cause by the Catholic Church is also seen through the existence of numerous church groups and organizations, whose main objective is to fight against human rights abuses. The Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture is one example. This group is active in the domain of human rights and this is reflected by the topic chosen by members to meditate upon on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by this Bamenda-based Catholic association. The topic chosen was "Torture and Human Rights". The main speaker of the occasion, Archbishop Paul Verdzerkov of Bamenda, condemned the frequency of beatings of detainees and the use of torture by armed forces, calling for an "absolute and unconditional rejection of torture" (*Cameroon Panorama* 2001c).

The clergy has been equally active in drawing the attention of the government to the evils of corruption, a vice which has made Cameroon infamous, in 1998 and 1999, as the most corrupt country in the world (Transparency International, in *Bishops of Cameroon* 2000). In the pastoral letter signed by all the Bishops of Cameroon, concerns are

expressed with regard to the harmful consequences of corruption for the state and citizens and they lament President Biya's inability to prevent the flight of capital from the country. They express their fear that the new generation of Cameroonians will eventually be made up only of those who do not know the difference between what is right and wrong and are ignorant of the right way to acquire wealth, saying:

children in our country are born and grow up nowadays in a climate of corruption which destroys their consciences from a very early age, by making them believe that success comes about not through study and honest work, but by deceit and theft!
(*Cameroon Panorama* 2001c).

To emphasize the need to fight against corruption and to buttress their own commitment to doing so, the Catholic Church invokes the presence of the deity with a prayer designed to sensitize Christians and Cameroonians on the mismanagement of Cameroon's resources and to change the consciences of the leaders of Cameroon. The prayer is reproduced in full:

Heavenly Father,

You always provide for all your creatures so that all may live as you have willed.

You have blessed our country Cameroon with rich human and natural resources, to be used to your honour and glory, and for the well being of every Cameroonian. We are deeply sorry for the wrong use of these your gifts and blessings through acts of injustice, bribery and corruption, as a result of which many of our people are hungry, sick, ignorant and defenceless.

Father, you alone can heal us and our nation of this scourge.

We beg you, touch our lives and the lives of our leaders and people, so that we may all realize the evil of bribery and corruption, and work hard to eliminate it.

Raise up for us God-fearing people and leaders who care for us, and who will lead us in the path of justice, peace and prosperity. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen (Bishops of Cameroon 2000).

Takougang and Krieger (1998) point to the fact that other mainstream confessional Christians have added their own critical voices to the social, economic and political malaise Cameroon is experiencing and their role in creating awareness in citizens needs to be recognized. This, they argue, serves to deny "the regime and its erstwhile political class a full measure of support and consent, an uncontested hegemony, moving from ambiguous silence to political awakening".

The challenges

The challenges to civil society in emerging democracies are daunting, especially in contexts where they are generally subsumed by anti-democratic politicians and bureaucrats under opposition political parties, intent on taking control of the institutions of the state. Repressive juridical and press laws have often been invoked to keep their activities on the periphery, out of the mainstream of social and political activity. These restrictions can, however, be surmounted if civil society undertakes to reorganize itself structurally with a well-defined focus and if recourse is made to long-standing traditional social structures for possible guidance.

a) Reorganize civil society

In the present circumstance where juridical and political provisions are aimed at controlling the activities of civil society, it should be able to mount a passive resistance to such control, at least by reorganizing itself by creating groups capable of defending citizens' rights against wanton abuse. It has the further challenge of undoing political and bureaucratic structures and mentalities associated with dictatorship and, through positive engagement, initiate a paradigm shift towards participatory governance.

Nyamnjoh (1999:104) points out that attempts to empower civil society have met with little success because it is poorly organized, "preferring to go in for sinecures rather than fight for professional interest". In the same way Yenshu (2001:1-14) links this weakness of civil society in Cameroon to weak social mobilization, exemplified by its incapacity to influence the direction of political and social debates and also to the

existence of repressive laws that do not favour its development. In the practical arena it has been impotent in the face of a series of summary executions and, most recently, by the refusal by local administrative officials for various political motives to register citizens on electoral lists (*Le Messager* 2002).

To transcend these limitations, civil society should develop its capacity and influence into a global national network capable of developing a more consistent and coherent democratic discourse and promoting practices and attitudes that defend the fundamental rights of citizens. It should strive to guarantee their obligations to one another and the state by holding them accountable with respect to the laws of the country and in terms of established democratic principles.. This requires a synergy among the various elements of civil society to bring pressure to bear on all anti-democratic forces in the state that debar the participation of citizens in the decision-making process. The experience in many African countries, notably in South Africa prior to the dismemberment of apartheid, could be replicated in Cameroon. The contributions of mass political mobilization and awareness-building among civil society organizations to achieve ongoing social transformation in South Africa, such as the Black Consciousness Movement, black workers organizations, schools and universities and Churches, should serve to inspire budding civil society organizations in Cameroon (Orkin 1995).

This capacity to mobilize should be built on informing, educating, lobbying—nationally and internationally—and, above all, by resisting the temptation to accept funds that compromise their independence and critical objectives. Such objectives would normally revolve around the general and universal values of justice, equality and equity; all of which run counter to the present parochial considerations animating many civil society organizations in Cameroon today.

b) Harness traditional social structures

The idea of civil society is not new, but what is new is its organization within the modern state and its assumption of a global character. Oliveira and Tandon (1994) say that human beings have always come together

for a common cause and the gregarious nature of humankind is expressed in an associational life of diverse character and objectives. This human solidarity, with its historic and philosophical origin, has come to be called civil society and nowadays requires greater citizen participation and influence in the affairs of modern states than ever before.

Today, there is empirical evidence of the existence of a plethora of movements in Cameroon within civil society, but most of these are organized in major towns and cities. They must be relocated to sub national levels and built up, from community levels upwards. Using Ekeh's concept of "two publics" Olowu (1995) stresses that the dichotomy between what is local and the national interest is somehow responsible for the current social gap between citizens at these respective regional levels. The citizen project needs to be revisited, especially as the mass of Cameroon's people live in the countryside. They need to be integrated into the new political culture; organized and educated. In addition a liberal system of information flow that transcends the present social and political chasm between these two realms must be established. It is true that life in rural Africa hinges on associations: this is an indication that ancient traditional social structures such as revolving credit associations and title societies³ need only to be developed and mobilized to give the majority of people a route to more effective participation in national political and social life. Their perennial and enduring nature means that they could be used effectively in the construction of institutions that defend basic human values.

Conclusion

Civil society has been identified as a critical agent in the democratization process in Cameroon. It remains one of the most viable and potent options for social change that is capable of drawing the attention of all citizens. As a citizens' project it could tap into the roots of local culture and tradition, while at the same time embracing what is essentially a universal human value, such as the right to a religious belief. This

³ Traditional social institutions that confer titles on individuals on the basis of their social achievement or contribution to the advancement of their society.

requires the total reorganization of the structures and forces of civil society to render it more meaningful and influential in the transition process. The attempts by the government to introduce limited democratic reforms have up till now fallen far short of expectations, as exemplified by widespread abuses of human rights and the most blatant forms of corruption reported in high places. This has exposed the degree of the ineffectiveness of civil society in Cameroon in bringing about change. Only a thoroughgoing reform and the introduction of genuine democratic principles that incorporate the masses, especially the majority who live in the countryside, could serve as a lever in the entrenchment of a strong, democratic culture in Cameroonians. Civil society, which has the capacity to bring about such reforms, should be an active participant in this process.

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