



The Quagmire of Cameroon's Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to show that political parties in Cameroon have a lot of work to do in order to revamp their profile. This work should be rigorously and efficiently done in terms of accountability, leadership, field activities, training/education, democratic practices, social issues, infrastructure, fundraising activities, party cohesion and unity, the evaluation of results and activities, the situation of vulnerable groups as well as pre-electoral /electoral/ post-electoral activities. Furthermore, substantial work should also be done in order to come up with a legal instrument which grants the head of the opposition a well-defined status.

In order to improve the situation of Cameroon's political parties as concerns the twelve points mentioned above, and as regards other issues, the following should be taken very seriously:

- The need for political parties to always resort to experts in political issues whenever the need to do so arises;
- The need for opposition parties to always unite their forces whenever the need arises;
- The need for the ruling party and opposition parties to always concert so as to resolve their common problems;
- The need to drastically reduce the number of political parties in Cameroon;
- The need to seriously rationalize political party activities so as to combat popular, true and negative perceptions about political parties;
- The need for all electoral stakeholders to offer fair electoral chances of success to all political parties by taking claims on electoral irregularities very seriously and by endeavouring to overcome them;
- The need for political parties to work with successful foreign political parties and learn from their experience;
- Etc.

Political parties contribute to the welfare of political life in a country.¹ They provide ideologies which shape government action or activities in many domains (political, civil, social, economic, financial, cultural, industrial, educational, religious, etc). They provide invaluable human and intellectual resources in all the said spheres of life. Furthermore, they

*Bring people together to achieve control of the government, develop policies favourable to their interests or the groups that support them, and organize and persuade voters to elect their candidates to office.*²

In Cameroon, their presence is mostly felt negatively. This unfortunate situation obtains in terms of accountability, leadership, field activities, training/education, democratic practices, social issues, infrastructure, fundraising activities, party cohesion and unity, the evaluation of results and activities, the situation of vulnerable groups as well as pre-electoral/electoral/ post-electoral activities.

There is **no rigorous and meticulous accountability** in Cameroon's political parties. This shortcoming is very discernible in the financial sphere. The said parties receive funding from the government during elections, etc and do not render a transparent account of their respective expenditures after electoral and other activities. Their respective leadership machineries behave as if their grass roots are not entitled to any transparent financial accountability. Many of their financial activities are shrouded in secrecy. This situation obtains both in the ruling party [The Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) and the opposition parties].

There is **a serious or chronic leadership problem** in many political parties in Cameroon. In this connection, most of these parties are suffering from the Founding Fathers' Syndrome. The founding fathers in each of these parties have been autocratically managing party affairs right from the very first days of the existence of their party up till now! Most of them claim that they are not answerable to party structures. They have formed coteries or little exclusive groups. Furthermore, some party leaderships practise nepotism tribalism, favoritism, etc. The case of the Cameroon Democratic

Union (CDU is quite illustrative). The chairman of this party (Late Dr Adamou Ndam Njoya) was replaced at the helm of the Fouban Council by his wife (Patricia Ndam Njoya) to the dismay of many CDU members.

Field activities within political party circles in Cameroon are wallowing in inertia and experiencing administrative hurdles. Apart from the CPDM, which is very active in the field due to its quasi-unbreakable bond with government authorities, all political parties in Cameroon are either dormant or find it difficult to carry out their field activities because of administrative bottlenecks. One of such parties is the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM); it finds it difficult to organize its rallies because administrative authorities, on the strength of their pro-CPDM leanings, scarcely give them the leeway to do so. Furthermore, the majority of Cameroon's 317 political parties do not even have the financial, technical, human and material resources that enable them to conveniently deploy themselves in the field.³ They do not, or hardly organize, rallies and party congresses or conventions.

Training/education is absent in the majority of political parties in Cameroon. Their members "are not tutored (through seminars, workshops, etc) on the values that are held sacred" in their respective parties in particular and in Cameroon's politics in general.⁴ Apart from very few parties such as the ruling party (it has a training centre for its members), political parties in Cameroon do not take training/ education seriously.⁵ Consequently, it is not surprising to notice that their members do not master the contents of their parties' respective constitutions; they do not know the main ideologies of their respective parties; etc.

Many Cameroonian political parties are lacking in the domain of **democratic practices**. Though a good number of them bear the word "democratic" in their respective appellations or names, they do not live up to the expectation of democracy.⁶ Many of their decisions

³ As of June 2020, Cameroon had 317 political parties (only eight of these parties are represented in the National Assembly and Senate, while just 18 are represented in councils). Source: Cameroon's Ministry of Territorial Administration. This regrettable situation is partially due to poor or no party deployment in the field.

⁴ Alamu Adebola Omoniyi, "Value Re-Oriented of Political Leaders as an Instrument of Restructuring Nigeria for Democratic Consolidation and Development, *Greener Journal of Sciences*, 2020, 10(1):pp.21-25

The quotation "are not tutored.....held sacred" is culled from this article.

⁵ Many political parties in Cameroon do earmark no or little funding for training/education purposes.

⁶ Some of these parties are as follows:

a) Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM);

¹ It should be noted that in this work, the term "parties" refers to "political parties" and "party" refers to "political party".

² CliffsNotes, "The Function of Political Parties", Available at: [cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/american-government/political-parties/the-functions-of-political-parties](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/american-government/political-parties/the-functions-of-political-parties)

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are being imposed on members; a good number of party officials are being dismissed or replaced unceremoniously and/or undemocratically; many party members are being expelled undemocratically and/or unceremoniously; etc. Furthermore, Cameroonian political parties scarcely organize elections. A good number of party officials have been in authority for quite a long time without facing any serious elections. Finally, these political parties (apart from the ruling party) find it difficult to express themselves in the form of rallies, demonstrations, etc. A good number of their high-profile field activities have been banned by State authorities.

The social dimension of Cameroon's political parties is neglected by most of them. They are insensitive or impervious to (in terms of concrete action) the needs of their members.⁷ They do not substantially assist their members in trouble (The case of members injured in clashes with forces of law and order during demonstrations illustrates this point). They do not earmark symbolic or substantial funds for the welfare of their members. Furthermore, there is a rift or wide communication gap between those in authority in these parties and the grass roots. The ruling party abundantly illustrates this point. This is a party whose leader does not bother to identify with the grass roots party members; he is not very close to them in terms of communication (in terms of discussions, dressing, empathy, etc).⁸

Most political parties in Cameroon lack **befitting infrastructure**. Some of their offices are in dilapidated structures or buildings while others are found in small poorly-maintained buildings. Apart from a few parties like the ruling party (which has befitting offices and buildings in some areas in Cameroon), Cameroon's political parties do not have good or befitting offices and buildings. These offices are poorly equipped (they lack enough office materials, etc); party staff working in them are poorly paid and unqualified.

Cameroonian political parties do not bother about **fundraising activities**. They mistakenly do not care about organizing activities to raise funds for their various endeavours in offices and in the field. In terms of fundraising, they depend very much on the government, their members and partners, at the expense of fundraising activities. They do not see the

b) National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP);

c) Cameroon Democratic Union (CDU);

d) Social Democratic Front (SDF).

⁷ In Africa, political parties are expected to assist their members in need (financially, morally, psychologically, materially, etc) on the basis of community or African solidarity.

⁸ The head of Cameroon's ruling party (CPDM), President Paul Biya, never puts on or sports his party's uniform.

need to resort to fundraising experts. In a nutshell, their capacity to raise funds through activities is dormant.

Cohesion and unity in some political parties are undermined by factions and dissenting groups. This situation is best exemplified by the dissenting groups in a well-known or historic party called *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC). The worsening political situation in this party, in terms of unity and cohesion, is being exacerbated by government's string-pulling action. Furthermore, even the ruling party's unity and cohesion is undermined by some dissenting voices and groups in it which insist on having their interests taken into consideration. In order to counter this situation, the ruling party imposes strict party discipline on its members up to the extent of violating the rights of these dissenting groups to express themselves.⁹ It, thereby, confirms Benjamin Disraeli's claim that in politics, there is no honour.¹⁰

Political parties in Cameroon do not **meticulously and judiciously evaluate or assess their activities and results on a regular basis**. They do not deem it necessary to resort to experts in the domain of the evaluation of political party activities and results. That is why they keep on committing the same errors over the years. They depend on the perceptions or opinions of a few party members.

Vulnerable groups such as women, youths and the physically challenged (persons living with physical disabilities) are experiencing some setbacks in Cameroon's political parties. In this connection, female representation in party leadership circles is still not up to expectation; this representation is improving very slowly as concerns elective posts. The situation of youths and the physically challenged is not very different.¹¹

Most political parties in Cameroon do not know how to manage **pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral issues**. They prepare poorly for elections. They believe a lot in last-minute or late preparations. During elections, they are unable to judiciously strategize collectively and individually in order to beat the ruling party in constituencies during elections. In the wake of elections, they do not organize critical, objective and substantial post-electoral sessions aimed at bettering their electoral results.

⁹ This violation exists in many political parties in Cameroon (CDU, SDF, NUDP, etc).

¹⁰ Benjamin Disraeli, "Political Party Quotes", Available at: brainyquote.com/topics/political-party-quotes Consulted on:30/06/20

¹¹ Apart from the aforementioned poor representation of the physically challenged, their social and physical condition is not taken seriously in political party activities.

It is now crystal clear that political parties in Cameroon have a lot of work to do in order to revamp their profile. This work should be rigorously and efficiently done in terms of accountability, leadership, field activities, training/education, democratic practices, social issues, infrastructure, fundraising activities, party cohesion and unity, the evaluation of results and activities, the situation of vulnerable groups as well as pre-electoral /electoral/ post-electoral activities. Furthermore, substantial work should also be done in order to come up with a legal instrument which grants the head of the opposition a well-defined status.

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- The need for the ruling party and opposition parties to always concert so as to resolve their common problems;
- The need to drastically reduce the number of political parties in Cameroon;
- The need to seriously rationalize political party activities so as to combat negative, popular and true ideas concerning political parties, such as that of Ray Bradbury;¹²
- The need for all electoral stakeholders to offer fair electoral chances of success to all political parties by taking claims on electoral irregularities very seriously and by endeavoring to overcome them;¹³
- The need for political parties to work with successful foreign political parties and learn from their experience;
- Etc.

¹² Ray Bradbury, "Political Party Quotes"

Available at: brainyquote.com/topics/political-party-quotes
Consulted on:30/06/20

Ray Bradbury asserts that anyone who belongs to a political party stops thinking.

¹³ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *How to Prevent and Combat Electoral Fraud in Cameroon (Practical Guide)*, Yaounde, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012, p.9

In this guide, opposition parties in Cameroon as well as many national and international observers claim that all elections organized in Cameroon since the return to multi-party politics in the 1990s have been marred by numerous irregularities, especially electoral fraud.

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