

*Confidence Chia NGAM**

**DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPING IN
CAMEROON 1990-2000: PROFILING CONFUSING POWER
PATTERNS VERSUS INDIGENOUS RESPONSE IN THE NORTH
WEST REGION**

Abstract: To the various transformations that gripped the world and its economies in the 1990s, the new demands and responsibilities and the new ways of making use of resources, African countries south of the Sahara responded in quite different but interesting ways. In Cameroon, these new developments occasioned paradigmatic changes which took various contents and shapes, one of which being the formation of particular indigenous groups. A typical area in Cameroon where there was almost a unique response to this changing political matrix is the North West Region, also known as the Bamenda grasslands. This paper traces the basis the foundations of democratic transitions alongside the resurgence of political conscious groups in the North West Region. It maps out the new contours created as well as their plight in the pursuit of new identities and patterns of loyalties in the changing socio-political and economic landscape within a decade time span.

Keywords: Cameroon, Bamenda, democracy, economy, transition

*

Introduction

The usage and definition of Landscape has undergone significant shifts in Geography and its related social science contemporary disciplines. It has systematically shifted from being a region with its accompanied physical and tangible features to anchoring conceptual frames that can alternatively represent structures of cultural and social characteristics, such as a “linguistic landscape” or even go further to embrace ethnic undertones. Landscaping or landscapism grows out of the contention that humans are always in a tortuous search for new forms of belonging, identities or profiles in the evolving Nation–State discourse. Instinctively trapped in such elastic confinements, communities or ethnic entities always find

* Assistant Lecturer, Department of History, University of Maroua; ngamconfi@yahoo.com.

themselves engaged in an endless battle of either creating new contours in the existing landscape or designing new topographies for emerging groups to negotiate evolving frontiers. This paper sees the concept of landscaping to be the approach, modes of adjustments and various responses put up by a people as a therapy for changing times. It perceives the Cameroon historical landscape to have undergone significant changes as a result of internal and external pressures. In this connection, it maps out how the people of the North West Province of Cameroon conducted themselves in the changing political climate alongside the strategies adopted by the government to exert its influence over these exalting new trends stretching from 1990 to 2000.

Situating the Issues en Vogue

Almost out of the blue¹ and against a background of excruciating economic hardship, President Paul Biya opened up the way for a new political and socio-economic landscape in Cameroon in the 1990s. Thought and appreciated as a quantum leap in the general movement towards pluralism and a wider spectrum of liberty of thought, of expression and above all, of association, this political twist designed a new landscape where most groups profiled themselves through varying responses.² At that time when most people were sufficiently assailed by hard times, political jingoism and confusion which laid the foundation for gross disorder became a pattern. In this context, the myriad of socio-cultural and economic groupings of the Bamenda grasslands produced a fascinating topography worth being zoomed in through a historical lens. In the main, this found expression in the proliferations of contrasting schemes and facades of belonging, patterns of respect and geopolitical landscaping that gripped Cameroon and became graphically dramatized in the North West Province.

Ordinarily, these changes were like cosmetic designs and opportunities to traditional societies whose immediate concern was not political positioning in an evolving Landscape but mainly how to cope with the hard times. Concretely, this could not be the case because the new age of pluralism required not only the participation of the literate and conscious political classes but equally, the direct and

¹ A vivid picture of how this kind of sudden turn came more out of the blue has been painted by Joseph Takougang and Milton Kreiger (1998) in *African states and societies in the 1990s. Cameroon Political Crossroads*, Colorado Westview Publishing House. This is considered to have come out of the blue because it was less expected by the political class in Cameroon at the time even though elsewhere in the world scene it was clear that pluralism was not only increasingly being sought for but also largely becoming unavoidable.

² Dele Olowu and Soumana Sako (eds; 2002), *Better Governance and Public Policy: Capacity Building for Democratic Renewal in Africa*, Blue Hills Avenue, Sumerians Press Inch, pp.62-63.

indirect participation of the traditional class with grim or completely no regard for age, social status, cultural class and geographical location.³ The situation became more precarious when the CPDM was formed which relied more on traditional societies and ethnic configurations for popular support. In this regard, new groups emerged. They were mainly groups constituted by people who desired to boast their images in this new political topography. However, the locus of this study got its particularity in that it was an area replete with a variety of first, second and third class traditional leaders known variously as chiefs and fons. It was mainly under the ambits of their leadership that the ethnic units including people of varying aspirations were cajoled to play political roles.⁴

Under these circumstances, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) was launched on the 26th of May 1990 in Bamenda. As a new political platform built on socialist principles, it sought to address issues which gave quite challenging moments to the New Deal Regime. The campaign to launch the party attracted a lot of grassroots support especially among the Bamenda locale. This was further accentuated by the poor interpretations of the meaning of pluralism in Cameroon at the time. In single or dispersed files, these new trends generated tensions among the political minded classes across most towns in the country. As indicated shortly, the hardship that rocked most families from the mid-eighties dispelling individual and collective faith in any constituted authority only helped to add fuel to this tension. The forceful launching of the SDF and its accompanied activities throughout the country were simply branded by the Minister of Territorial Administration as “illegal”. Some overzealous militants of the CPDM in view of these uprisings even fabricated new slogans in Cameroon political topography like “enemies in the house” and continued to vow that multi-partism could only be launched in Cameroon over their dead bodies.⁵ This was not of course new in the history of Cameroon administration. It was indeed a sort of a “Carbon photo” of the style used by Ahidjo since independence to silence his enemies.⁶ Though Biya is widely believed to have given milder orders to the core members of his administration to handle disobedience in

³ Samuel P. Huntington (1997), *Clash of Civilisation: Remaking World Order*, New York: Touchstone Book, pp.89-81.

⁴ In spite of the battery of challenges meted on the traditional leaders by the tentacles of Colonialism, the North West Regions could at least still boast of being a strong bastion of ethnic units who were still very loyal to their natural rulers.

⁵ A cross section of these CPDM militants failed to understand that their national Chairman (Paul Biya) was already prepared to face competition in almost all spheres of life. To know the evidences of this preparedness see president Biya’s speech during the CPDM second ordinary congress of March 1990.

⁶ J.F. Bayart (1978), “The Structure of Political Power” in Richard A. Joseph (ed), *Gaulist Africa: Cameroon Under Ahmadou Ahidjo*, pp.66-69.

Cameroon, diehard supporters of the regime mostly applied their personal mind frames in quelling disorder.⁷ With such vengeance-ridden mind sets, they became grossly overzealous. It is this over zealousness that helped not only to kill people but significantly dramatized the evils of the regime.

Incidentally, the launching of this party in Bamenda and the killing of people by armed soldiers woefully failed to stop or end mob action but rather united the many socio-political and ethnic groupings against the regime and consequently against the CPDM. While the literate and many people of the politically minded board bothered themselves with party philosophy and manifestos, the men and women on the streets or at the grassroots found faith in the promises of Ni John Fru Ndi's SDF party, which for the time being was identified as having a magic therapy power for the myriad of problems the people of Cameroon faced at the time. These expectations produced a favourable topography which the ardent members of the SDF exploited at its full length and breath. Still to their favour was the fact that the SDF leader Ni John Fru Ndi succeeded to build a charisma around himself and his team. Added to this was the fact that his pioneer political team mates were people of articulately fine scholarship and sound socio-cultural backgrounds.⁸ In substance, they were not only cognizant of the North West values, customs, tradition and patterns of respect, but equally mastered the kind of things most Cameroonian wanted to hear at the time.⁹ Indeed, they were the kind of people who had a sound reading (mastery) of the political thermometer in the North West Province in

⁷ There is much debate about the kind of instruction given by Biya to the members of his government concerning disorder in Cameroon. Whatever the case, the action of the men in uniform on the streets of Bamenda had his blessings given the fact that none of them was ever punished or reprimanded. Again, his speeches to the Cameroon people at the time had ocular evidences of a rude dictator who had little mercy for the cry of the people on the streets. Some slogans like "Me voice donc a Douala, La conference nationale est san objet" are just restricted cases in point.

⁸ A restricted list of the pioneer SDF leaders will include Justice Wakai Nyo, Barister Bernard Muna, Professor Siga Asanga, Professor Kale Koefele, Professor Paul Nkwi. The elaborate list and CVs of these men and women that build the foundation of the SDF is found in the Annals of the SDF in their secretariat.

⁹ Interview with Francis Ngam Chia, Albert Waingeh and Andrew Akonteh. The first two were members of parliament from Boyo on the CPDM ticket and the latter a former member of parliament from Mankon on the SDF ticket. They were interviewed in August and September 2011. While the former insinuated that the pioneer SDF leadership played on the intelligence or the ignorance of the traditional people to drum up support and wimp up sentiments, the latter, who happened to have accompanied the SDF chairman in most of his campaign to the grassroots, simply affirmed that it was a political gimmick worthy of praise at the time. He ascertained that deep party programmes and philosophy of governance were considered at some point to be cosmetic details which were not so required by the seemingly motivated lot who most of the time displayed loyalty just by sight of their team.

particular and Cameroon at large. In fact, its slogan of “power to the people and equal opportunities” did not just win the hearts of many, but also went a long way to create new patterns of respect, search for identities, positioning and forms of political loyalties.¹⁰ All of these combined to foment forms of various reactions among the groups within the region against the regime. Before this new trend of events, socio-political and economic groups were acquainted with a way of life which glorified the one party system with its whims and caprices. Despite the sudden rise of such groups, it was difficult for all of them to adjust rapidly to suit the changing times because the velocity of the new developments far exceeded that of traditional or indigenous stock.¹¹

Indeed, the abrupt departure from the traditional economy that reigned in Cameroon, which was characterised by a kind of tight dictatorship to a pluralistic political climate, incidentally provided avenues that many indigenous units sought to exploit, though this occurred under doubtful circumstances.¹² In the main, groups that were either non-functional or had been forced out of work by the evils of individualism or lack of tolerance resurfaced. As an outgrowth of trouble times, indigenous ethnic groups who strove to address the burning issues of the time found themselves deeply soaked in a pull of surmountable difficulties. The typology, manifestations and scourge of these difficulties are evident in the basis for and evolutions of the groups that surfaced in the North West Region during this period.

Basis for the Resurgences of Groups

The resurgence of new groups of people with its accompanying sources of power, quest for new identities and loyalties in the North West Region in the early and later half of the 1990s was therefore rooted in the combined weight of poverty and consistent failures of the New Deal Regime.¹³ For more than two decades (1966-1990), the socio-political and economic situation in Cameroon at large and the North West Region in particular grew progressively unbearable. In substance, most of the

¹⁰ Achile Mbembe (1993), “Crise de légitimité, restauration autoritaire et déliquescence de l’État” in Peter Gescheire and Piet Konings (eds), *Path Ways to Accumulation in Cameroon*, Paris Karthala and Leiden Africa studiecentrum, pp.345-371.

¹¹ To see how these difficulties came about, see Monte Palmer (1980), *Dilemmas of Political Development: An introduction to the politics of the developing Areas*, 3rd edition, Florida, Peacock, pp.62-63.

¹² The circumstances surrounding such transition are always doubtful. For a bigger picture of these developments see Toyin Falola, “Economic and Social developments in Contemporary Africa” in Richard Olaniyan (ed; 1982), *African History and Culture*, Lagos: Longman Group limited, pp.111-114.

¹³ A vivid picture of these excesses and failures are captured by Napoleon Konghaban Lukong (2006), *Civil Disobedience in the North West Province 1990-1996*, MA Dissertation, University of Yaounde I, pp. 10-39.

groups that resurfaced during this period were not typically new. A greater number of them were pre-colonial ethnic units that were rendered obsolete either by the colonial or post-colonial bureaucratic administrative system. A great proportion of them only re-appeared with a new focus on the changing political landscape during this time. One noticeable feature of this kind of “New-old” indigenous units is that they instinctively appropriated themselves with inflated profiles in the political landscape and sought to address burning issues of the time using mainly boldness of imagination or figments of African traditional religion.¹⁴

They therefore saw the age of civil disobedience and the near collapse of constituted authority in the North West Province as a pleasing return of pristine traditional groups and institutions that glorified their autonomous past. With this as their working compass, they were encouraged to join the series of civil disobedience partly because they were sure of the protection of their gods and equally because the authorities seemed frail in the face of the mounting political, social and economic pressures emerging from some vague convictions of the masses on the streets. These are the same vague convictions that pushed them to organise the burning and looting of people’s properties after the 1992 presidential elections. In a sum, this sort of prompt “wrongful punishment”, mated on people mostly from the traditional social stock, generated a sense of animosity between individuals and competing groups aspiring to different political opportunities. In the main, it produced new contours and patterns of belonging among indigenous people and greatly altered the geo-political landscape.

Politically, the one party system and the over centralized administration during the Ahidjo and Biya reigns failed to meet the changing appetites and expectations of quite a good number of Cameroonians at the time. Under the guise of building a strong and united Cameroon within the ambits of a one party (CNU), Ahidjo laid a platform which favoured only those who were loyal to him.¹⁵ In this kind of climate, power and the prerogatives to rule circulated only within the limits of those who could sing praise worthy songs about the follies of the one party

¹⁴ By 1990s, Bamenda was inhabited by a cross section of people from various ethnic backgrounds. This notwithstanding, they had succeeded to build a Bamenda approach to the burning questions of the day. Though soundly rooted in the doctrines of Christianity, what animated peoples’ spirits and pushed them in numbers to the streets was the faith in African traditional religion.

¹⁵ In our discussion with Paul Nkwi and Anthony Ndi on the quality of popular response to Ahidjo’s self-styled leadership, they consented that the absence of almost all types of freedom created fear and animosity among the politically conscious classes of people especially in the North West Province. Joint discussion carried on the 15th of September 2011 at the Catholic University of Cameroon in Bamenda.

system. In fact, most appointments into top political positions and promotions in the civil service were done following this rhythm

In both regimes, power circulated in the hands of a privileged few. In this regard, a large majority of highly qualified people were left out or abandoned in the cool to negotiate their survival in the blue. Such abandonment could not go without implanting seeds of mounting frustrations along their path to survival. The end result was a dramatic appearance of many indigenous groups and ethnic units on the political landscape with voracious appetites of rebellion. In spite of these frustration and all sorts of discrimination, the last years of Ahidjo's reign are seen to have succeeded to produce a somewhat "buoyant economy" which largely diverted people's attention from the political frustrations.¹⁶ However, this did not in any way wipe out the scare of a "sit tight macabre dictatorial regime" that gave little room for the exercise of democracy alongside various forms of freedoms. Although elections of deputies and other municipal officers constantly held, most of those elected did effectively represent their constituencies or even pretended to be answerable to them. They were, for the most part, groups of individuals almost entirely hand-picked by the president and his close associates to protect their regime. The case of the military was exceptionally appalling because Ahidjo did everything to ensure that all shades of the military were under strict command and constant survey. With this kind of machinery, he was sure to dictate every aspect of socio-economic and political life in Cameroon. Takougang and Krieger describe this situation more succinctly when they affirmed that: "Governors, high ranking military and police officers were constantly being moved between command sites for the same reason [...] In order to prevent any threat from the military, Ahidjo compartmentalized the various units (army, navy, air force, police, gendarmerie and the Republican Guard) under separate leadership. The different branches were coordinated from the presidency through the ministry of armed forces. The close attention given to the military appointments and promotions made the security force's loyalty to the similarly managed civilian authority soundly automatic."¹⁷

This notwithstanding, over-centralization and dictatorship was most of the time diluted by the existence of a few gainful opportunities elsewhere. There was therefore some form of grim hope in spite of the political scare. The transition of the

¹⁶ See Joseph Takougang and Milton Krieger, *African States*, pp.54-57. They argued convincingly that by the time Ahidjo handed over power to Biya in 1982, Cameroon had as a result of brute force but skilful leadership emerged as a mid-income developing Country and as such was widely held to be a success story in Sub Saharan Africa. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased tremendously and an average national growth rate of 6 per cent between 1977 and 1982.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.54.

mantle of state leadership from Ahidjo to Biya in 1982 yielded some kind of vague joy in the hearts of those who had been kept out of any form of leadership positions in the Ahidjo administration.

These new sources of hope came alongside expectations of imminent changes. Although Biya promised in his first inaugural speech delivered in the National assembly on November 6th 1982 that there was no better way of showing gratitude to Ahidjo than continuing with the socio-economic and political programmes that he set up,¹⁸ there were wide expectations that the age of gerontocracy was fast fading away. Candidly, Biya's youthful look, public outfit and Christian background also rekindle hope and wide expectations in the mind-sets of the trained and ambitious men and women who were feeling isolated by Ahidjo. In anticipation of the return of better days, they decided to engage in national issues once again on wholesale basis. These only went along way to sustain the sovereign foundations which laid the basis for the resurgence of lobby groups in the political landscape. This kind of formations gained momentum when the CNU party was renamed CPDM by Biya in Bamenda on the 24th of March 1984. The organic substance of CPDM programme was documented in the Communal Liberalism which clearly spelt out the principles and ideals of the "New Deal". Under the dictum "Rigour and moralization" in any sphere of private and public life which again guaranteed transparency and accountability in the management of state affairs, CPDM and its corresponding New Deal were all seen as not only being timely but equally indispensable. The party ideals appealed to many people who were longing for greater participation in political developments. The overall impact of this changing political matrix and facades of leadership trends was that there was an offshoot of many pressure groups and ethnic affiliations which strove to gain position in the new offing.

Economically, the economy of Cameroon by the early 1980s was widely seen to be like a model in Sub Saharan Africa. Due to favourable oil revenues, terms of trade and foreign investments, Cameroon national and international debts turned out to be the lowest in Central Africa. As indicated earlier, the Gross Domestic Product increased dramatically from 300 billion CFA in 1972 to about 2000 billion

¹⁸ See president Biya's first speech at the National Assembly of Cameroon of 6th November, 1982. In this inaugural address president Paul Biya abundantly laid emphasis on the fact that Ahidjo programmes and policies were the best for an emerging nation like Cameroon and as such undertook to follow in his hills. The evolution of events and circumstances in Cameroon just two years after proved that things were not going to be the same again.

in 1982.¹⁹ With this, the youths were able to find jobs and unemployment was not really a big problem. Left at this level, there could have been no need for the resurgence of groups and ethnic units to check what they later called "the fallacies of the regime". Unfortunately, the economic situation staggered into very odd moments. It soon became clear that jobs were in short supply.²⁰ To make a bad situation worse, bribery and corruption became the order of the day. This generated attention and confusion among those who believed in meritocracy. Those who anticipated good tidings and calculated varied opportunities in Biya's administration were proven largely wrong. This already worse situation was further accentuated by over taxation and a drastic fall in the prices of Cash Crops like coffee and cocoa. In this atmosphere of economic insecurity, the state soon found itself incapable of sponsoring its projects. For once in more than two decades, farmers who had enjoyed good fortunes since the independence saw their good old days slowly slipping out of their hands.

Indeed, two sets of closely related people were deeply touched by this appalling economic malaise. The first sets were farmers who, like elsewhere in Cameroon, constituted more than two thirds of the total population.²¹ The second was a large number of youths and other adults who were engaged in a variety of businesses like trading, Car maintenance, Construction, Carpentry, Furniture, design as well as Hair Dressing. To add to this was a significant number of taxi drivers, hackers and idle boys who were also indirectly dependent on the success of economic situation of their relatives. The overriding effect was that the dependency ratio continued to escalate. This only went a long way to fuel tension, confusion and a feeling among the North West masses to stand against the regime at any given opportunity.

The deterioration of the economic situation and the drastic drop in prices of food crops accompanied by a rise in the unemployment further accentuated by fragrant cases of corruption and favouritism made life increasingly unbearable to many people and families in the North West Province.²² This situation of economic

¹⁹ The World Bank Reports about Cameroon in the 1980s were quite positive. These statistics have been profoundly presented by Takougang and Milton K., *African States and Societies*, p.97.

²⁰ Walter Gam Nkwi (2010), *Voicing the Voiceless: Contributions to the Closing Gaps in Cameroon History 1958-2009*, Bamenda: Langaa Research and publishing common Initiative Group, pp.137-140.

²¹ The North West Region was not blessed with any natural resources like minerals, natural forest or water species. Aside rich human resources, farmers constituted more than 70 percent of the total population.

²² The Catholic Church was quite maddened by the toll of misery affecting people's life in Cameroon at the time. In an Episcopal conference concerning the economic crises dated 3rd

deterioration continued with increase velocity in the later part of 1980s and 1990s. As indicated above, the decline was accentuated by civil disobedience that marked the early half of the 1990s.²³ As if this was not enough, the CPDM proved to be consistent in error or in for a rough ride in its political gymnastics. It continued to heighten misery by closing down some of the key areas that provided meagre but necessary incomes and employment to the North West Lots. Due to a declining economic situation areas that could still provide some kind of hope like the Upper Noun Valley Authority (UNVDA), Wum Area Development Authority (WADA), Santa and Obang Coffee Estates and the North West Development Authority were all forced to close down.²⁴ Though the government made frantic efforts to explain that such a scheme fell within the ambits of the general austerity measures concordant to the World economic slump, a good number of those who served in these organizations were from the grassroots, as such needed no lectures or sermons on the sordid details of world economic situation anywhere. To them, this was simply a design by the New Deal Regime to keep them under the permanent yoke of excruciating poverty. Even within the rungs of some seasoned politicians in the North West province, the closure of these institutions became a veritable source of worry. J.N. Foncha found this particularly disturbing and viewed it as a tragic ploy manufactured by the regime to undermine or destroy all the virtues he upheld in his political life.²⁵ The disgruntled lay-off workers and their bewildered dependents became very prepared as a result of these accumulated economic grievances to destroy the “New Deal Scheme” before it finished destroying them.

Even at that level, matters took a turn for the worse when the police and Gendarmes officers decided to fight economic hardship by extorting money from the lay-off workers through incomprehensive tax raids, multiplicity of unauthorized toll gate collections and unwarranted search of homes and offices. Besides creating an atmosphere of insecurity, these misbehaviours from the men in uniform added another dark tint to the assembly of economic frustrations of the masses.

June in Cameroon during the Pentecost Sunday 1990, p.18, they made their fears and position to the government sufficiently heard.

²³ For a clear view of how civil disobedience handicapped the Cameroon economy and accentuated hardship in every sphere of life see N.K. Lukong, *Civil Disobedience in the North West Province 1990- 1996*.

²⁴ Most people in the North West as per our interviews with Thomas Ngam on the 12th August 2011 in Anyayjua-Kom held and understood the closure of these key organizations as a deliberate intension on the part of the government to infuriate the North West people. WADA was liquidated in 1989.

²⁵ He lamented this in his resignation letter submitted to the central committee of the CPDM in June 1990, p.2

Closely related to this was the fact that the government abandoned most roads in the North West Province to the magic therapy of fate. Road maintenance and construction announced by the agents of the New Deal Regime during these hard times were never carried or even attempted to be carried out.²⁶ Indeed, the state of roads in the North West during this critical period was, to be fair, barely manageable. This largely contrasted with the Hay days of a buoyant economy where key roads in the North West were usable almost year round and delicate areas like the Sabga Hill Road stretch along the way to Kumbo, Nkambe and Mesaje were already tarred and constantly maintained. As announced shortly, from the late 1980s maintenance work in almost all roads in the North West was for the most part abandoned. The fluctuating prices of farm products and a dramatic shift by most farmers from cash crop cultivation to food crop cultivation, alongside the bad road situation, only helped to dramatize the scale of frustrations of the masses.

The last straw that sort of cut the "Godden Not" was the devaluation of the Francs CFA in 1994. With a mounting unemployment, escalating dependency ratio, mass abandonment of farms accompanied by a significant reduction of salaries and other allowances, there was little money in circulation. Though a number of banks closed down as a result of capital flight, low investment and above all lack of transparency and accountability in financial management, it was the devaluation of the CFA francs that ruined the hopes and aspirations of the working class about any dream of a return to normalcy. With this situation, life became a matter of survival of the fittest, which besides adding the toll of frustrations of the masses equally helped to provide more enemies for the New Deal regime. It was therefore essentially the economic consideration that attracted wide spread attention to the evolution of the Cameroon economy at the time because it touched every bit of the traditional and modern units. Caught in such new developments, most of them frigidly adjusted to meet the changing times.

The social climate at the time equally contributed to the resurgence of groups and ethnic units in the Bamenda grasslands. There were a handful of social difficulties, some arising from the financial mishaps of the decade and others a consequence of the civil disobedience that rocked all of the North West. In retrospect, Ahidjo administration had created a wide gap between the youths and the old, and by extension those who were at the centre of decision making with those

²⁶ One of these fascinating promised projects was the Ring Road project, which was to link up all the Divisions of the North West Region, hitherto known as province. It was one of the Key promises made when he visited Bamenda at the heart of the crises in 1992. He promised to personally supervise the project but this was soon seen by the masses as a tactless political gimmick that was lacking both in intension and substance like many other promises of the new deal regime.

who were at the periphery. This centre-periphery dichotomy complex created social tensions and cleavages, but real social problems came from the array of discrepancies in the domain of education and health.

In education, the post-colonial education policies had mostly an office-focused orientation.²⁷ With this, most of the youths upon graduating from School were anxious and prepared to work in the offices which as of the late 1980s were available only to a privilege few.²⁸ This kind of unfortunate situation was compounded by the fact that corruption, nepotism, tribalism and favouritism in getting jobs in the Cameroon civil service took an upward trend. The North West region's situation was particularly precarious because the youths were feeling either misled through their educational formation or largely abandoned by the New Deal System. The upsurge of corruption in the public arena was received with shock and bewilderment by a bulk of youths in the North West because Biya had insisted in a number of occasions that such vices were counterproductive to a nation that had its eyes on sustainable development. The issue of an appropriate education scheme that was responsive to current needs became so crucial in the early 1990s so much that the Post News Paper decried the situation fragrantly in 1991 when it argued among other things that "Students should only be encouraged to go to School but should also be assured of employment after having burnt the mid night candle oil for several years. This meant that the government should implement policies which will encourage both the private and public sector to provide jobs for the thousands of unemployed but qualified Cameroonians. Parents are surely not happy to see their children roaming the streets in search of jobs for more than four years; an educated but unemployed citizen is a danger to his community".²⁹

This argument by a large measure aptly translates the feelings of a majority of youths and parents in the grasslands because stray and idle youths easily yielded to the numerous calls from the main opposition party to participate in a chain of civil disobedience that rocked Cameroon during this period. Together with the dense

²⁷ M.B. Gwanfogbe (2006), *Changing Regimes and Educational Developments in Cameroon*, pp.170-171. Also see Jacob A. Ihims (2003), *A century of Western Education in Cameroon: A study of Its History and Administration (1844-1961)*, Bamenda: Unique Printers, pp.123-125. After independence the Cameroon Government still erroneously continued with the education platform earlier put in place by the administering authorities. As time unfolded, it became clear that there were not enough offices to encompass the University graduates. The North West Region had a number of students who were prepared to work but the rapid economic decline did not give them such opportunities. In frustration, many of them got involved in mean jobs. Most of them yearned for the return of good old days where people had a choice to make between jobs upon graduation from the university.

²⁸ See "Cameroon Tribune of Monday", August 5th, p.5-6.

²⁹ Cameroon Post News Paper No 86 of October 11-17th 1991, p.7.

network of the economic frustrations of the season, this helped to make Bamenda in particular and the North West in general the centre of the combination of civil disobediences that rocked Cameroon in the 1990.³⁰

Still in the domain of education, the management of General Certificate of Education (GCE) by the Ministry of National Education was viewed by the larger portion of the Anglophone community nationwide to have reduced the standards of the examination almost to rubble.³¹ Though there was general disregard for constituted authority and some kind of division according to political inclination, Anglophones of all works of life are said to have buried their political hatchets in pursuit of the lost glory of the GCE standards.³² An outgrowth of this search was the formation of vocal and deeply determined associations like Teachers Association of Cameroon (TAC), Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM) and Cameroon Civil Service Union who cued up with the rest of Anglophone parents to clamour for an independent board to manage their examination from the registration process to the issuing of certificates.³³ Pressure on the regime was not mounted only in conferences by mere slogans. Maddened obviously by the reaction of those on the government bench who attempted to frustrate their move by forming rival groups like The North West Elites Associations (NOEIA), these groups' grievances grew into rancour. In that mind frame, they vehemently called on the pupils and students to stay away from school until an amicable solution to their problem was sought out. Without any intension to skew the facts, they jointly made the Anglophone community and the world at large to know that it was wrong and a sort of moral deficiency for their children to be attending schools without a credible board to manage their examination at the end of the courses. To them, it was a waste and an indelible stain to the Anglophone tradition of probity in all spheres of life. In their words they emphasized their position in asserting that "The goal (meaning sole objective of education) is worth much more and there is no better option. After all, what do Cameroonian children have to show for earning secondary certificates and university degrees in the present clogged, rotten and completely corrupt educational system? Indeed the patriotic thing for English speaking Cameroonians to do right now is to keep their children away from school for it is the real peaceful way that can lead to

³⁰ This hypothesis has been upheld by writers like B. Jacque (1998), *West Cameroonians: The Minority in ambicultural state*, translated by Jetyim Jotanga, Montreal, Les presses du L'Université de Montreal, pp.14- 15.

³¹ N.N. Susungi, *The Crises of Unity and Democracy in Cameroon. Can a Country which has pronounced Itself Dead be saved by Democracy?*, Abidjan, n.p., carried by the whole text.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ This was carried variedly in an open letter from the English speaking Students from the South and North West Provinces dated 20th August 1985.

change of heart to our hitherto insensitive detractors towards the only real hope for laying down solid foundation for a prosperous English speaking Cameroonian community”.³⁴

Determined not to impair the future of their children as per the communiqué above, the refusal by the GCE examiners to mark the GCE coupled by the Ghost town activities exceptionally prolonged the resumption of the 1993 academic year till late October 1993. Draconian measures akin to any irresponsible regime were deployed to make the strike null and void, but calm was only restored when the GCE board was created with its consequent text of application.

Another social problem that fomented the resurgence of groups in response to the changing political climate in the North West was the role played by religious bodies. From any compass direction, the North West Region as of 1992 was replete with a good number of religious groups notably: Christians, Muslims and believers of African traditional religion. These were networks that exerted a lot of bearings on the beliefs systems and conduct of the people. In times like the ones in the 1990s, the directives or counselling of spiritual leaders was required because the fear of the unknown was on the dramatic rise. The church was particularly conscious of the suffering of the people as a result of ruthless torture and killing of civilians by armed men, ransacking of homes and looting of property as well as the show of no regard to the natural rights of man. The main Christian churches, notably the Baptists, Catholics and Presbyterians, though apolitical for the most part, had pressing new challenges aside.

Against a background of mounting tension, the Cameroon Baptist Convention under the leadership of reverend Ngum sent a delegation of four to attempt moralising the Cameroonian government on the 15th of May 1991.³⁵ During their meeting with the Prime Minister Sadou Hayatou, they made the minister to understand that the Baptist church was dragged into the matter by its doctrine to society which focused on the wellbeing of man. They maintained that they were not and shall never be in favour of strike action, rebellion or civil disobedience.³⁶ While lamenting the fact that the political and socio-economic situation in Cameroon at large and North West region was growing out of hand, they never mince words to

³⁴ F.B. Nyamnjoh (1996), *The Cameroon GCE Crises: A Test of Anglophone Solidarity*, Limbe: Noremec Press, pp.154-160.

³⁵ See copy of Cameroon Baptist Convention Memo to the Cameroon Government dated 15th May 1991. In the preamble of this memo, the C.B.C authorities gave a long and exhausting lecture of the fact that, as a church founded on love and peace, they were prepared to remain neutral in politics. They went further to say the prevailing political situation in Cameroon at that time called for the intervention of any organisation with its eyes on Justice.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

make the prime minister know that the church does not support any system that is corrupt, and lacks respect for its people's rights and responsibility.

Consequent of all of this, they vehemently called on the Cameroon government to reconsider their response to the plight of the aggrieved people. Additionally, they pleaded with the state authorities to consider the people's complaints on transparency in the management of public property, respect of human rights and fair treatment of people in the law courts.³⁷ To these men of God, that was the only way out of the disturbing political climate that impaired peace in Cameroon. With regards to the territorial structure of power, they advocated that a ten autonomous state administrative system was better placed to respond to the calls made by a cross section of the political formations in Cameroon.³⁸ These Baptist leaders claimed not to have anything to do with politics, but requested and proposed issues to the government which were separated from the ones claimed by the mob on the street by a very thin membrane. By making such issues known to the State in that meeting, the Baptist leaders were indirectly making the government know that they had helped sensitize a good number of people about the evils of the regime.

Pointedly, the position of the Baptist leaders was not as acerbic, telling and somewhat demanding to the government, as that of the Catholic Church. Acting on behalf of the bishops of the Bamenda Arch Diocese, Arch Bishop Paul Verdzekov sent on Tuesday, 27th of October 1992 a pastoral letter to all Christians in which he made the mind of the Catholic Church known by all when he emphasized that:

*Torture subverts the moral authority of the state and erodes its credibility to claim recognition and respect as a state....The path which leads to peace passes through dialogue and concerted actions at all levels.*³⁹

Though this later proved to have sufficiently assailed the government, which least expected such a distant position from the Catholic Church, it resonated the moral duty of the church and its role in checking the ills against mankind, held by the prelate to be the most precious of God's creation. The bishop was particular about Bamenda and its environs, but the situation elsewhere in the country did not leave the authority of the Catholic Church indifferent.

Faced with the same awkward treatment of people in the Douala Arch Diocese, Cardinal Tumi decried: "Numerous families are victims of arrests and pillage. In certain cases, young girls and babies who are sick are left to their own devices...Occupants of certain houses are flogged and thrown into police vehicles

³⁷ See Copy of this Memo in the CBC Headquarters secretariat. Also see this Memo published by the Cameroon post No 75 of Thursday, June 22-27th 1991, p.2

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Arch Bishop of Bamenda's Arch Diocese to all Christians, circulated on the 27th of October 1992.

like objects....at the military base arrested people have to undergo punishment in the hands of a certain lady who is specialized in logging and torturing people...The people of Douala are living in fear because at any time men charged with the keeping of the law and order can drop in anywhere and cart off anyone present in a truck...⁴⁰

The air of general dissatisfaction that gripped Bamenda in the decades after 1990 helped to dramatize the series of disenchantment and breach of trust between the Cameroon people and their governing authorities at the time. As per the above citation, the situation of the economic capital during this period was more appalling and equally invited the church to intervene. It also demonstrates or leaves a vivid image of the interpretations of freedom or age of pluralism that defined the Cameroon political topography stemming from the 1990s.

As announced shortly, the health situation in terms of existing policies, facilities, trained personnel and Hospitals in Cameroon at the time fomented anger among the Cameroon lots. The growing vague awareness that anything related or directly linked to the government was more of a poisoned gift helped to discourage most people from taking their patients to government hospital.⁴¹ Those who refused subscribing to this conviction and took their patients to the government owned Hospitals had the opportunity to read the deploring hospital situation at close range. They found the hospitals' staff to have adopted a spirit of high profiled nonchalance in the discharge of their duties.⁴² This only helped to give credence to the lots claim on the streets that any government institution was not to be trusted in serious business.

Issues were further aggravated by the fact that it became exceptionally difficult to meet a doctor for proper consultation in the Bamenda general Hospital. Although this could be traced from the fact that quite few doctors were trained to handle the health conditions of the growing Cameroon population at the time and secondly by the fact that many trained personnel in the Medical field were pursuing further studies abroad, people were tired with the air of nonchalance in most government hospitals. These were all opportunities that the opposition parties and

⁴⁰ Christian Wiyghansai Shaaghan Cardinal Tumi, *The Political Regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya and Christian Tumi, The Priest*.

⁴¹ Interview with G. Asafor, aged 78, on the 3rd of March 2011. He is a former Nurse of the Bamenda Regional Hospital.

⁴² *Ibid.* He held that this was probably provoked by the fact that salaries of Health workers and the accruing advantages were drastically slashed. Most workers developed a spirit of coming and leaving from work whenever they deemed it necessary. Work schedules were hardly respected and even the administrative authorities found it increasingly difficult to sanction non committed workers.

particularly the SDF exploited on some sort of wholesale basis to whip up people's sentiments.

In a sum, the basis for the resurgence of the various socio-economic and political groups with competing feelings of disgust in the North West province in particular and Cameroon at large was soundly rooted in the conflagration of factors directly linked to the follies of the regime and the prevailing economic and political situation at the time. Enveloped in such circumstances, the resurfaced groups participated in creating a socio-political landscape which created difficulties to many people and opened a wide gate of opportunities to a politically minded few. An understanding of how this twin set of opportunities and difficulties paraded the changing landscape can be zoomed from the typology of the various groups that emerged.

Types of Groups or Units

It is definitely difficult to attempt establishing an exhaustive list of the many socio-economic and political groups that aroused or re-orientated their activities in the decades after 1990. This is partly due to the fact that many of them did not really take the shape of established groups and also because even some established ones constantly changed their programmes, appellations and focused in tune with the rotating surrounding circumstances. For the purpose of convenience we have attempted to class the groups and units according to converging themes which in itself is also a tolerated approach.

To begin with, the age of pluralism and the introduction of various forms of liberty were received differently by the North West Cameroon grassroots populace. As pointed out above, most of them interpreted this period to mean and imply the gracious return of the "Hey days" of traditional arrogance where traditionalism and its various institutions dictated the way of life. As a result they were less likely to accept orders from the elements of modern administration like the Prefects, Divisional officers, Governor or any other appointed official. This is the mind-set that caused them to form groups that could easily attain their objectives like *Ibain*, *Adia-ah*, *Atongle-Anteh*⁴³ in Kom. Elsewhere in the region, time honoured ritualistic groups like Mfuh in Nkambe, Takumbeng in Mankon and Samba in Bafut were refurbished to respond to new and evolving needs. Together with *Njong*, *Chong*, *NjangandNdongall* pre-colonial intuitions membership to institutions was tactfully redefined. In the main, those who in spite of the circumstances still proved loyal to

⁴³ Interview with Johnson Cheng Tohmentain, 68 years, 24th of March 2012. He is a member of the *Ibain* group. Done at FuliKom. *Ibain*, *Adia-ah*, *Atongle-Anteh* literary means Light power and the village ears. All of them stood to create some form of real or fictive awareness.

the CPDM were technically pushed to the periphery during deliberations of real traditional business matters.

One important group that also emerged as a result of this alternating political landscape was the association of fons by the North West traditional Leaders. Unlike some of the above mentioned groups that emerged to gain political space through protest or boycott actions was the Association of North West fons Union. The desire to form such a union emerged from special circumstances. At one end, the fons were eager to form a concrete union within which they could drum up support to Paul Biya, who on many occasions proved that he trusted them. At the other end, the Fons wanted to quench their increasing nostalgia to revive the defunct Southern Cameroon House of Chiefs and its corresponding Southern Cameroon Chiefs Conference. In any case all of these had synopsis of converging themes and encounters. Against this the Fons Association was finally formed in the Mankon Palace in May 1998, while a few fons converged under the leadership of Fon Doh Gah Gwanyin III of Balikumbat to found North West Fons Conference. Though these factions had different claims of legitimacy, they were different from the other groups or associations discussed above in that they were composed by people of witty political command.⁴⁴

Secondly they sought to gain political peace in the new political landscape.⁴⁵ They veiled themselves behind the sole objective of protecting tradition and bringing peace in the North West Province but in substance went every way out to lobby for appointments and other favours from the regime.⁴⁶ Having appropriated themselves with such daunting assignments, the fons alienated themselves from a cross section of the people at the grassroots. The people at the grassroots who were like votes repositories to the fons found themselves brought to “a wide junction of confusion”. It became clear that both the traditional constituted authority and its machinery of governance were fast facing out but with a difference in velocity. Though a few fons like Fon Mbinglo II of Nso mainly succeeded to distance himself from this new unfolding, the youths of the North West decided from 1998 after the formation of the North West fons Union to negotiate their future in a variety of ways.

⁴⁴ To see a graphic presentation of how these natural rulers exerted influence and command on the people under their leadership see V. B. Amaazee (2002) *Traditional Rulers (Chiefs) in Anglophone Politics in Cameroon History*, Presses Université, pp.83-5.

⁴⁵ Kabila Fokum (2009) *Royal Beggars: North west Fons and the Decadence of Tradition*, The Messenger Publication, whole text.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19. He refers to fons of the North West as power drunk individuals with inflated personalities.

By this time, a number of people - mostly youths who had animated various forms of protest on the streets - were tired or had been forced by circumstances like the demagoguery of the government to run out of steam. Indeed, "operation ghost town" and different forms of street protest to exert pressure on the government agents largely represented by the CPDM amounted almost to nothing of substance. By 1998, a majority of these youths had nothing to show for their toils in the early half of the decade but memories replete with macabre assassinations of a few of their friends and kings mates. There was equally a mounting scare of the rape scenes of their sisters and mothers in broad glare, as well as emasculation and amputation of others by merciless forces of Law and order. The government known at the grassroots simply as CPDM had at least proven its dexterity and rudeness in handling strikes as well as the determination not to compromise with emerging groups and forces in the changing political landscape. This incidentally brought some strands of wide divisions among the youths of the Northwest.⁴⁷ This division continued to weaken the spontaneous rise of groups with a spirit to destroy the regime. It became clear that there was need for an alternative method for cohabitation. By every calculation, this created other sources of cohabitation especially among the grassroots who through torture had come to understand that the problems of that decade needed a profound sense of reasoning and not brute force. Though both of them (those on the government bench and those either standing on the fence or with the opposition) had different aspirations for the future of their province, it was clear that the political landscape had great change in tune with the changing circumstances.

Conclusion

The history of the political landscaping in Cameroon with a special scant of the North West Province is full of changing matrixes, wild dreams expectations and opportunism in various ends. Pushed more by external impulse than by domestic concerns, president Biya placed Cameroon on a new and somewhat challenging political lane. This kind of landscape, though greatly admired by the political minded few, brought in tow masses that most often animated the scene with blind boldness. This boldness, wild dreams and expectations made the Majority of people to form or refurbish pristine traditional groups to strike new bargains in the new offing. By indulging in chain civil disobedience and demonstrating open distrust to government institutions in most parts of the North West Province, the masses proved

⁴⁷ George Ngwane (2004) *Way Forward for Africa*, Denver Colorado, USA, pp.2-4. He uses the African situation to describe the strands of wide divisions that occurred in the socio-political and economic Landscape due to irresponsible leadership and class them into the Complacent, the Wasted and the Critical generations.

having backgrounds but a common destiny. In the main, they were eager as much as possible to use indigenous institutions to gain new patterns of respect, loyalties and identities. With such developments the New Deal Government adopted a brute but flexible political muscle to handle the emerging themes in Cameroon political History. Noted for the birth of witty political groups in Cameroon, the North West Province as a result of its sometimes tragic sensitivity to the appalling conditions in the country incidentally grew in stature to become the political heartbeat of the country. In these circumstances, opportunities and disappointments were rife at both ends which only gave more reason to adjust its political mechanics to institute a steady machinery of “Divide and Rule System” which continued to form the contours of the new political landscape from the year 2000.