

ELECTIONS IN CAMEROON: GOVERNMENT BANKRUPTCY

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Elections that were held on 22 July 2007 looked very similar to the others that were held in Cameroon in the recent past. Like in the past, government ministers and high state functionaries were quite competitive about inventing methods of election fraud in their various areas of origin to honour their stations in government with victory. They spent huge sums of money bribing people to engage in multiple voting, buying administrative officials, buying NEO agents or buying court decisions. Yet we are told fighting against bribery and corruption is one of the cardinal engagements of the government! Would a government that tolerates and even encourages bribery and corruption so openly ever help society to recover from corruption? Would elders that so openly engage the youth in bribery and corruption ever earn the respect of the youth of this country?

It is usually said that you know exactly where you are with a burglar or a murderer, but you never know where you are with a liar. Government officials parroted the lie about free and fair elections, and gave the impression that all was being done to ensure this through computerisation, the uprightness of administrative officials and the alacrity of NEO... The naïve only know now – after the fact - that it was all a big lie to send them to sleep for the field to be left wide open. Going to sleep because of such assurances and reassurances over a lie that had been told in 1996, 1997, 2002 and 2004 is a reflection of naivety and helplessness. Only the foolish get fooled twice; the wise change tactics to force adversaries to act on their own terms. But what with the truth pitifully expressed by Shakespeare that the world is a “great stage of fools”? What with Hitler’s line that no matter how big the lie, repeat it often enough and the masses will regard it as truth?

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These big lies are usually sugar coated by foreign voices. One of such foreign voices has been that of the Commonwealth! The Commonwealth observed Parliamentary elections in Cameroon and issued a report that they assumed to be a source of improvements to the electoral system. Following a long wait, the Secretary General appointed a special envoy to Cameroon to help with an electoral system the government seemed determined to maintain. This was followed by a flurry of activities, many comings and goings that left the perception that the system would change. The famous 31 October 2003 meeting in London chaired by the special envoy of the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, ended with a report that informed public opinion that the government of Cameroon “presented to international partners its agenda for wide-ranging reforms in the areas of elections management...” for which friends of Cameroon “undertook to provide significantly enhanced financial and technical assistance...” Then the comings and goings resumed, but failed to cause the Cameroon government to budge! The famous ELECAM was put in place, and political parties were called to Yaounde for consultations and camaraderie with the government over computerisation, ELECAM, registration and all! And so all the stakeholders went to sleep, except the government!

Today is rich with attacks and repartees. “You cheated!” “So what? I won!” Such exchanges go on daily between opposition leaders and members of government, between civil society leaders and high state functionaries. These are all people we are supposed to look up to in society as models of good behaviour and good example. The public has the right to expect a certain standard of behaviour from those supposed to be members of the government that runs the affairs of the nation on their behalf. It has the right to a certain standard of behaviour from those we depend on, to make Cameroon a place to live a fulfilled life.

A government needs authority before it can preach virtue. Such authority is gained through the occupation of the moral high ground. It is lost through repeated moral failings. Government morality has been sacrificed on the alter of

crooked electoral victories that have led to the loss of the respect of the people. Turning around to preach against corruption would only be comparable to a drunken person preaching temperance!

A special symbolism is always attached to the vote of the Head of State, President of the Republic during elections. Symbols are usually a theatrical part of government used to communicate political value, ideals and specific world views. Symbols constitute coded messages. They can have a clear plot structure, serve a practical argument and appeal to citizens. The vote of the Head of State is supposed to symbolise trust in the electoral system through the plot laid down by his political communicators. But if such communicators exist at all, they failed woefully during this election, like they did in the past.

In the past, the voting station where the Head of State voted was lined with CPDM party colours and ballot papers, against the constraints of the law. The coded message sent across to the citizens was that of flawed elections! This was always taken to mean that his political communicators are mindless party zealots. The unfortunate outing of the Head of State during the 22 July elections symbolised by his fulfilment of his civic duty at the polling station, the brief campaign tour of the city and his partisan utterances, took him and his communicators to the height of political arrogance and zealousness! Again, the coded message was about flawed elections! A President may want a big majority to continue to govern and ask the people to give it to him; that is his right. But when a President starts giving messages in symbols and codes that the people have become irrelevant to his rule, something is certainly very wrong!

It is James Madison who said that if all men were angels, governments would not be necessary. After such electoral debacles, one can turn around and say that if governments were like our own, governments would not be necessary! The Administration, under the authority of the Head of State is responsible for organising elections. The Head of State is therefore entirely responsible for all

the irregularities and fraudulent manoeuvres that characterised the twin elections of 22 July 2007. Historical reputation is hostage to future events. Whether historians and public memory will emphasise the gains or the setbacks of the presidency of Mr. Biya will depend on the course of events after he has left office, meaning the next five, ten, twenty or even thirty years. Presently, we are in the presence of what is usually referred to as the unpredictable past.