

FLAWS IN AFRICA'S DOMINANT ONE-PARTY DEMOCRACIES: THE CASE OF CAMEROON AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

One-party domination has been firmly established as the mainstay in African politics. Usually hailed as 'liberators from the fangs of colonization', the dominant party enjoys absolute majority in Parliament, its members occupy most positions in all levels of the state hierarchy and its ideologies and propaganda are the slogans in most public gatherings, local and national forums. Opposition parties, on the other hand are reduced to groups of frustrated individuals limited in scope, with inadequate resources and no significant possibility of creating a nation-wide impact. Cameroon and South Africa are *de jure* multiparty states whose political landscapes have all been dominated by a single party since democratic elections at independence. With a combination of both empirical and secondary data, this paper sets out to examine the factors that help to entrench the supremacy of dominant parties and to analyze the extent to which one-party dominance has contributed in thwarting good governance in these selected African states.

Keywords: Cameroon, South Africa, one-party system, one-party domination, one-party democracy, good governance, multiparty politics.

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1. Conceptualizing Democracy and One-Party Domination

There is a great debate amongst scholars and politicians as to what constitutes democracy, fuelled by its varied implementation and format in Africa, and globally. Highly centralized autocracies such as the People's Republic of China, North Korea¹, Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, refer to themselves as democracies. It is perhaps as a result of the multiple interpretations and implementation of the concept, that scholars² reduce it to what is referred to as procedural minimum. This includes competitive elections, universal franchise, and absence of massive fraud and the effective exercise of civil liberties. While these tenets are necessary in ensuring transparency, accountability and social welfare, Przeworski and Limongi³ on the other hand, insist on an alternation in office before classifying a regime as democratic. Their argument is based on the hypothesis that the absence of political turn-over results in a *de facto* one-party state which in turn paves the way to dictatorship. It can, therefore, be suggested that the absence of a change in government in democracies is at best untested and at worst, dictatorial.

One-party domination is a situation in multi-party politics where the political landscape is perpetually overshadowed by a single political party. The dominant party remains in power for so long that it becomes synonymous with the state. It generally enjoys absolute majority in parliament, its caucus deploys loyalists and strategic elites to staff the civil service, its ideologies and slogans are the singsong in public gatherings, and whether 'by hook or by crook', it is sure of winning the next election. Pempel⁴ argues that dominant parties believe that only

¹ The constitution of China refers to the country as a 'democratic dictatorship' while North Korea is known as the Democratic Republic of Korea.

² Giliomee, H. and Simkins, C. (1999) 'The Dominant Party Regimes of South Africa, Mexico, Taiwan and Malaysia: A Competitive Assessment' in, Giliomee, H. and Simkins, C. (eds.) *The Awkward Embrace: One Party Domination and Democracy*. Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers.

³ Przeworski, A and Limongi, F. (1997) 'Modernization. Theory and Facts', *World Politics* Vol. 49, N° 2, 155-83.

⁴ Pempel, J. (1999) 'Introduction' in Giliomee, H. and Simkins, C. (eds.) *The Awkward Embrace: One Party Domination and Democracy*. Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, p. ix.

by their remaining in power would the national interest as they chose to define it, be served.

The political landscape in Cameroon and South Africa has been dominated by a single party. Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has been in power since independence in 1960⁵, for the former, while the African National Congress (ANC) has ruled since the return of majority black rule in South Africa in 1994. The ruling dominant parties of these countries frequently have to reckon with criticisms, disgust and sometimes outrage and demonstrations from their citizens. In Cameroon, this has manifested in covert and overt denunciation of the government, voter apathy, threats of secession and violent demonstrations. In South Africa, on the other hand, service delivery protests are the order of the day, prompting researchers Buccus, Nair and Swart ⁶ to conclude that South Africa is the most protest-rich country in the world. These protests are accompanied by power tussles between and within political parties, the most dramatic being the split in the ruling ANC in 2008 that resulted in the birth of the Congress of the People (COPE).

In spite of these challenges, there is a strong indication that both the CPDM in Cameroon and the ANC in South Africa will not leave power anytime soon. The 2004 and the 2009 presidential elections results in Cameroon and South Africa respectively confirm this conclusion. The 2004 election results published by the Minister of State for Territorial Administration and Decentralization, Marafa Hamidou Yaya in Cameroon, and those of 2009 in South Africa by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) revealed that while the CPDM won over 70 percent of the electorate, the ANC in South Africa swept over 65 percent of the votes. The major opposition party in Cameroon, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), won just over 17 percent of the electorate while in South Africa the

⁵ At independence, the party was known as the Cameroon National Union. The name was changed by President Biya in 1986 to the Cameroon People's Democratic Party.

⁶ Buccus, I. (2007) 'Rethinking the Crisis of Liberal Democracy.' *Mercury*, Edition 1, August 16. Niar, N. and Swart, W. (2009) "SA Increasing its Lead as Most 'Protest Rich' State", *The Times*, July 24.

runners up the Democratic Alliance (DA) won less than 15 percent. The question that arises is why, in spite of this apparent hostility by the citizenry towards the governments of these countries, do they still remain in power? What are the factors that have contributed in perpetuating one-party domination in both Cameroon and South Africa?

2. Factors that Enhance One-Party Domination in Cameroon and South Africa

It is worth mentioning here that the factors which contribute in consolidating one-party domination in these selected states are not necessarily universal. There is no rule of thumb in entrenching one-party dominance in Africa hence generalizations should be made with caution. Each of the selected dominant parties exploits the factors that lie at its advantage or at the disadvantage of its opponents so as to consolidate its rule. They vary from one country to another and are determined by certain historical, social and institutional underpinnings. The risk of making generalizations in the Humanities has often involved contradictions and/or exceptions in contemporary events. This necessitates the use of empirical data.

In Cameroon, the manipulation of the constitution has been instrumental in consolidating one-party domination. With an absolute majority of 153 out of the 180 seats in parliament, the CPDM manipulates the constitution to suit its designs and desires. As Ibrahim⁷ accurately argues, the problem with most African governments is that they do not respect the provisions of their constitutions. Most political systems on the continent are characterized by excessive uncertainty and abuse of power, which in turn translates into a lack of basic freedoms and denial of popular sovereignty. Such is the scenario in Cameroon. Within a period of five decades, Cameroon has adopted three constitutions, the federal constitution of 1961, the unitary constitution of 1972 and the 1996 constitution of the Republic, all of which were carefully drafted to

⁷ Ibrahim, J. (2003) *Democratic Transition in Anglophone West Africa*. Senegal: CODESRIA, p. 2.

perpetuate the dominance of the ruling party. The Biya regime has largely been selective in implementing the provisions of the 1996 constitution. Articles 1, 14 and 53 provides respectively for a decentralized unitary state; the establishment of an Upper House of Parliament, therein referred to as the Senate; and the establishment of a Court of Impeachment with jurisdiction to impeach the president and other members of government with respect to acts committed in office.

While these fine Articles have conveniently not been implemented since 1996, Article 6(2) which stipulates an extension of the presidential term from five to seven years renewable once came into force immediately after the CPDM won elections in 1997. To make matters worse, the CPDM did not hesitate to flex its muscles in Parliament in 2008, to push for an amendment of the constitution to provide the president with immunity from prosecution for acts committed while in office and also to allow the chief executive to run for unlimited re-elections. This system of executive supremacy and constitutional blasphemy in Cameroon is the backbone behind the consolidation of one-party domination in the country.

Authoritarian politics has also contributed in entrenching political dominance of the CPDM party in Cameroon. There is no single political group, trade union, social gathering or any component of civil society in its entirety that has any overbearing influence on the CPDM-dominated government of Cameroon. The state is synonymous to a large sea monster as illustrated in Thomas Hobbes' (1651) *Leviathan*. It determines who gets what, when and how. It is an open secret that most corrupt African dictators do not organize elections unless they are certain of winning. By the time they do, they have put in place a series of meticulously crafted mechanisms to ensure that by hook or by crook, their party wins. Smith⁸ lists certain strategies employed by the Biya regime to annihilate his opposition. Radio stations such as Equinoxe in Douala and Magic FM in Yaoundé which were too critical of the government were closed down and their

⁸ Smith, P. (2008) 'How Long Can Cameroon's Biya Rule?' *African Confidential* Col 49, No. 24

offices ransacked by soldiers; Titus Edzoa, former secretary general at the Presidency and a presidential confidant, resigned as health minister in 1997 to challenge Biya in the presidential election, was promptly arrested and is serving 15 years in jail for embezzling state funds; Ayissi Mvondo, who aimed to run against Mr. Biya, died under mysterious circumstances; the main opposition leader Ni John Fru Ndi, was accused of and charged with murder; and the list goes on. This determination to subdue any opposition to the government has been translated into the solidification of CPDM dominance.

In addition, disenfranchisement, elections rigging and low voter turnout help in consolidating one-party domination in Cameroon. It is common knowledge that corruption is institutionalized in the country. For a country cited along the most corrupt in the world for over a decade, rigging elections and nullifying opposition has become an art. It is an endemic cancer-worm that is deeply-rooted in all facets of public and private life. From administrative officials, through the courts of law and the police, right down to the private sector, fraud, nepotism, embezzlement and bribery are parts and parcel of daily life. No doubt the country is still amongst the most corrupt in the world according to international corruption watchdog, Transparency International, actually topping the chart twice. With this formidable arsenal, government officials in Cameroon work effortlessly during elections to ensure absolute majority for the ruling party. Biya and his cronies have perfected the vice of elections-rigging. Ofege⁹ records this malicious scheme from the fabrication of artificial voters' registers, the stuffing of ballot boxes, the establishment of polling stations in wrong places (such as in chiefs' palaces), the absence of indelible ink, manipulation of result tallies, and the use of the gendarmerie to subdue dissidents. Besides, Mbaku and Takougang¹⁰ capitalize on Biya's reluctance to the creation of a truly independent electoral commission preferring that the government-controlled ministry of the interior be

⁹ Ofege, N. (2004) 'Corruption in Cameroon: State of the Art.' http://www.postwatchmagazine.com/2006/02/corruption_in_c_1.html

¹⁰ Mbaku, J M and Takougang, J (eds) 2004. The leadership challenge in Africa: Cameroon under Paul Biya, p.8. Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press.

the principal arbiter of elections. During the 11 October 2004 presidential elections, Cameroon's Minister of State in Charge of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, Mr. Marafa Hamidou Yaya declared that 4,529,000 Cameroonians registered to vote. With a population estimated at over 18,000,000 people, one could only imagine the number of Cameroonians who were disenfranchised.

In South Africa, the ball game is somewhat different. The ANC government has benefited from broad black majority support as a result of being the party that dominated the fight against and liberated South Africa from apartheid. Dreading a return to white minority rule coupled with the absence of a credible black-based opposition party has given the ANC a leeway over other political parties. The ANC government has exploited its huge support base generated by historical factors to entrench its dominance. It is no secret that the horrors of apartheid are still fresh on the minds of many black adult South Africans. It has been observed that whenever a white person for instance says or does something that offends a black person, the latter in turn usually attributes it to racism. The premier of the Western Cape, Helen Zille's predominantly white cabinet, comments made by ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema alongside other top-ranking ANC officials over the Caster Semenya saga *Sunday Times*, 23 August 2009, coupled with other on-going rivalries, have confirmed this assertion. There is thus a psychological attachment to the ANC whose members are still usually hailed as 'freedom fighters' and 'champions of the struggle'.

There is evidence that besides this, people continue to vote for the ANC because of the lack of a credible alternative party. Given the country's apartheid past and ongoing racial tensions, any political party that intends to capture the votes of the black majority constituting approximately 80 percent of the population has to appeal to their needs. The majority of blacks dread a return to white domination in the form of DA rule. Infighting within the newly formed Congress of the People (COPE) has merely confirmed speculations that the party might not have the best

interest of the populace at heart. The ANC thus remains the only party that appeals (at least historically) to the majority of blacks. Against this backdrop, the ruling ANC has sought to entrench its dominance by eliminating the dividing line between party and the state. Rather than being regarded as a temporary government, the ruling party in South Africa has slowly become synonymous with the state¹¹. No doubt the country president Jacob Zuma confidently maintained that the ANC would rule till Jesus Christ returns.

However, since multi-party democracy was introduced in South Africa in 1994, the country has been rated by the international community as a fairly good democracy. There have been regular free and fair elections contested by several political parties. Constitutionalism, judicial review, rule of law, respect for human rights and an independent and free media characterize the South African political landscape. Perhaps, this has convinced South Africans that they are not under autocratic rule, therefore, legitimizing the government and mobilizing support for the ruling party. The relative successes recorded by the ANC in terms of good governance and economic growth, has also been one of the cornerstones in the solidification of one-party domination in the country.

3. Defects of One-Party Domination

One-party domination runs the risk of degenerating to centralization of power. This is clearly evident in Cameroon which is a highly centralized unitary state. Besides providing for a presidential term of seven years with unlimited re-election, the 1996 constitution and subsequent amendments grants the president of the Republic the power to amend the constitution by a simple majority of votes cast by the CPDM dominated parliament; and immunity from prosecution for all acts committed in office. This centralization of power in the hands of the chief executive has often resulted in gross violations of human rights as opposition to the regime is considered subversive. Even though South Africa has a much more practical decentralized system of government, there have been hints for the ANC

¹¹ Giliomee, H. and Simkins, C (note 2 above), p. 337.

dominated government to exercise more control over the provinces. That would be a gateway to centralization.

Centralization of power in turn results in elite rule and gerontocracy. This elitist class arises out of the need by party leaders to reward, protect and maintain loyalists and other strategic role-players who help consolidate the party's dominance. Members of this group are the fulcrum of the entire political system and the backbone of the economy. It is commonplace for members of the ruling party to occupy senior positions in government for decades. Sometimes, the same individuals get rotated from one senior government position to another for decades. A report by a French language monthly *La Cité* cited by Dibussi¹², records that about 80 percent of Cameroon's ruling class consisted of individuals who were far older than their official retirement age. Amongst the over 60 key members of the CPDM party who were cited are: Major General Pierre Semengue, 73 years old (first indigenous head of the armed forces in 1960); Felix Sabal Lecco, more than 90 years - President, National Council of Communication, (joined the Ahidjo government in 1969; Minister of Justice in 1970); El Hadj Ousman Mey - Chairman, National Social Insurance Fund, more than 83 years (founding member of Ahidjo's Union Camerounaise in 1958; Federal Inspector/Governor of North province from 1960-1983); Cavaye Yegue Djibril, 70 years - President of the National Assembly; Paul Pondi, more than 80 years - President of the Civil Aviation Authority (First Cameroonian head of National Security in 1960); Jean-Baptiste Beleoken, 76 years - Director of the Civil Cabinet at the Presidency, (Was the commercial adviser in the Cameroon embassy in Paris in 1961, and ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1973); Jean Keutchu, more than 85 years - Roving Ambassador (Secretary of State for Public Works in 1964; Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1971).

¹² Dibussi, T. (2009) 'Gerontocracy in Cameroon – These Old Men Who Govern Us.' <http://www.dibussi.com/2009/03/gerontocracy-in-cameroon-these-old-men-who-govern-us-.html>

In a highly sarcastic tone, the author maintains that 'in Cameroon, the dinosaurs of 1960 are still in office, while their grandchildren are still searching for their first employment,' all this in a country where life expectancy is 53 years (United Nations Statistics Division, 2008)¹³. As a result, government officials are more preoccupied with building clicks and networks rather than developing the state. This has contributed in thwarting the growth and sustainability of democracy, and has generally resulted in the establishment and entrenchment of an oligarchic and nepotistic gerontocracy in the country.

Besides, one-party domination has resulted in disenfranchisement and voter apathy in Cameroon. Schultz-Herzenberg¹⁴ is of the opinion that voter turnout is important in determining the quality of participatory democracy in a country. While high voter turnouts is a source of legitimacy, low turnouts on the other hand is often attributed to factors such as political apathy, disillusionment or even contempt for the government, especially in dominant party systems where election results are predictable. In a bid to perpetuate its stay in power, the CPDM has often engaged corrupt strategies targeted at disenfranchising citizens in suspected opposition strongholds. Decades of elections rigging and corruption has resulted in low voter turnout and contempt for the state. Low voter turnout in turn has seen the oppression of the majority by president Biya and his elites. This has paved the way for centralization of power, poor service delivery, a perpetuation of the vicious cycle of poverty and calls for secession by the minority Anglophones who have been marginalized politically, economically and socially. Perceived from this background, fine democratic tenets of rights of minorities, free and fair elections and civil liberties all remain but a dream in the country.

¹³ United Nations Statistics Division (2008) 'Cameroon'.

<http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Cameroon>

¹⁴ Schulz-Herzenberg, C. (2009) 'Voter Turnout Key to South Africa's 2009 Elections.' http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link_id=21&slink_id=7434&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3

In South Africa, the ruling African National Congress ushered in a new class of black economic elites, many of whom are largely loyal to the ANC party. Policies such as the Black Economic Empowerment have not been instrumental in alleviating poverty within local communities. They have merely been utilized as avenues for 'connected' individuals to enrich themselves. No wonder the country has been classified as one of the most unequal societies in the world (World Bank Report, 2006). That party explains the reason behind the numerous service delivery strikes in the country prompting researchers to confidently assert that South Africa is the most protest-rich country in the world. One could imagine that the remarkable democratic process practiced in the Western world have been developed and perfected over centuries. In this light, one would be tempted to maintain that Africa needs more time to develop its own system of democracy taking into consideration the specifics of the society. The problem here, however, is not the youthfulness of democracy in Cameroon and South Africa. It is the misconception held by the elites of the ruling party of these countries that only through their continuance in power would the national interest, as they chose to define it, be served¹⁵. This has seen the perpetuation of 'governments for life' in Cameroon with the end-result being autocratic rule.

Some of the hardcore disadvantages of one-party domination as portrayed in Cameroon do not prevail in South Africa due to the fact that the latter is still a fairly young democracy. With barely 15 years into multiparty politics, the demons of one-party domination (centralization of power, elitism, corruption, violation of human rights, etc) might still be taking their roots. Already, insinuations by the ANC that the state needs to have more control over the provinces already indicate moves to break away from the current system of provincial autonomy to a more centralized state. Besides, a change of heart by the ANC president from his election campaign's 'one term in office' to his post election slogan, 'let the people decide' indicates that power tends to corrupt.

¹⁵ Pempel, J. (note 4 above).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Democracy according to Schumpeter¹⁶ has evolved far beyond the classic perception as a prosaic, unsentimental political market place, characterized by the buying and selling of votes at periodic elections. It is far from a system in which people did not want to participate because they are more preoccupied with family and leisure pursuits. According to the author, democracy has transcended this parochial political culture where citizens were predominantly fairly ignorant of what constituted wise decision-making, and could easily be roused by demagogues. Stutner (2004) argues that democracy without turnover is at best fragile and untested; at worst, it is not really democracy at all. Even though the welfare of the people is sometimes catered for by politicians and expressed in policy in one-party dominated states such as South Africa, strong, credible and alternating opposition parties are necessary to provide checks and balances which are necessary ingredients for democracy to thrive. Without these ingredients, power will be absolute and absolute power as nineteenth century British historian and philosopher Lord Acton posits corrupts absolutely. Even though these checks and balances on executive power may emanate from both the legislature and the judiciary, their effectiveness is questionable when the political landscape is largely dominated by one political party.

Given this possibility, how can Cameroon and South Africa address these drawbacks of one-party domination? This is obviously a very difficult thing to achieve considering the fact that the primary objective of any political party is to ensure its survival by capturing and consolidating political power. That notwithstanding, a starting point could be to address those defects of one-party domination in these states. In Cameroon, there is the need for the creation of an independent electoral body, the need for the establishment of an autonomous anti-corruption unit with powers to prosecute, and commitment by politicians to observe the provisions of the constitution. South Africa on the other hand seriously needs to address the problem of service delivery and income inequality.

¹⁶ Schumpeter (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Recent reports of corruption and opulence of government officials has exacerbated the problem of mismanagement of state resources. Besides, the nationalists' branding of individuals as racists is a gateway to political extremism and a recipe for genocide. The ANC government and its activists need to overcome this shadow of apartheid and engage an all inclusive government in the spirit of truth and reconciliation and liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is thus a stepping stone to progress and development. As Diamond¹⁷ argues, it is a system in which executive power is limited by effective checks and balances, freedom of expression and the rights of minorities are upheld and party competition is strong. As a result, rights are effectively protected and enjoyed, and corruption is kept within bounds. Inasmuch as competitive, regular elections and frequent change of governments can result in job insecurity, corruption, instability and inconsistency in successive governments' policies, it is nonetheless an avenue for other motivated leaders to effect meaningful change and build on or revise policies of predecessors. It is also an opportunity for other citizens to engrave their names on the national stone. Long stay in power generally results in loss of inspiration, enthusiasm and charisma of a leader, while citizens on the other hand become apathetic, disgruntled and disgusted with the regime.

Fomunyoh as cited by Dibussi¹⁸ is of the opinion that it is extremely important to frequently renew political leadership in every country so new leaders can bring a fresh perspective to global trends and developments, and help move their countries in ways that may differ from previously long held typical and traditional approaches. One-party domination of a political system and centralization of power is obsolete with regards to the exigencies of the contemporary world. It does not fall in line with modern tenets of democracy, rule of law, constitutionalism, human rights and separation of powers.

¹⁷ Diamond, L. (1996) 'Is the Third Wave Over?' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p.23-24.

¹⁸ Dibussi T (note 12 above).

To achieve this tradition of liberal democracy requires commitment from politicians to separate the party from the state. By so doing, government officials alongside other members of civil society would be allowed to express their sentiments without fear or favour; state officials will execute their functions based on impartiality and objectivity rather than on expectation of political reward; party competition will be strong with an alternation of ruling party constituting a real prospect, corruption will be kept within bounds, abuse of power will be greatly curbed and the welfare of citizens will be greatly enhanced.