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Chapter

The Electoral Cycle and Grassroots Realities in Cameroon: The Omnipresent, Overbearing and Contested Political Elite

Numvi Gwaibi

Abstract

Electoral periods in Cameroon involve an impressive mobilisation of human, material and financial resources. Campaigning is marked by rallies, speeches, door-to-door solicitations, as well as vote buying, intimidation, ballot box stuffing etc. Electoral manipulation involves selective voter registration, tampering with the electoral roll and other administrative manoeuvres. At the centre of these activities is a group of people known locally as the political elite. These elites notably the head of state Paul Biya, key cabinet members, government officials etc. have been at the helm of the state since independence in the 1960s. At the receiving end are grassroots populations, who over the years witnessed the political elite appear on the eve of elections and disappear immediately thereafter. On occasion, the grassroots are able to see through the mirage, which often leaves some members of the political elite staring into the abyss. This chapter is based on events around the 2013 municipal and legislative elections in Mbankomo in the Centre Region of Cameroon. I employed participant observation, document and archival analysis, interviews among others to unearth and document the complex relationship between grassroots populations, party officials and other high-ranking members of the governing CPDM party during election periods in Cameroon.

Keywords: elections, campaigns, manipulation, political elite, grassroots populations

1. Introduction

“[E]lections entail the largest mobilization of the national population in a short time span and require the coordination of millions of individuals engaged in hundreds of different activities” ([1], p. 5).

The history of Cameroon is quite colourful. ‘Kamerun’ was a German protectorate from 1884 to 1919, then a League of Nations Mandate following the defeat of Germany in the First World War, and later a United Nations Trust Territory administered by Britain and France respectively [2, 3]. In 1961, the British and French sections of Cameroon were united under a Federal structure [4, 5]. In 1972 the federation dissolved following a referendum and the country became known

as the United Republic of Cameroon, and in 1984 the name was changed yet again to the Republic of Cameroon [6–9].

Unlike some neighbouring states in the Central African sub-Region, post-independence Cameroon enjoyed a relative measure of political stability [8]. Over the last decade however, a number of crises have shattered the myth often propagated by government officials and supporters of the ruling party about Cameroon being an ‘island of peace in tumultuous central Africa.’ Rising insecurity around the Lake Chad basin coupled with an upsurge in cross-border attacks in Northern Cameroon by the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram, as well as deadly cross-border incursions by rebels from neighbouring Central African Republic (CAR) in the East Region of the country has greatly undermined peace and security. Meanwhile, the on-going crisis situation in the two English speaking Regions¹ which according to the International Crisis Group² is gradually degenerating into a civil war has further undermined the country’s image as a safe and secure location. This crisis is a direct consequence of the country’s historical trajectory and the form of state that was adopted following unification in 1961.

The unitary approach to the nation-state was the predominant choice of African leaders in the decades following independence. According to ([10], p. 175); “independent Africa chose simply to step into the shoes of departing European powers.” The unitary state was therefore a continuation of the colonial state’s nation-building agenda which was aimed at fusing disparate ethnic and regional groupings into a single entity. At the political level, there was a concerted drive towards one-party systems as the sole vehicle for expressing political diversity [11]. With hindsight, it is generally agreed that this approach to statehood “fostered authoritarianism at the expense of constitutionalism” ([12], p. 1). However, when single-party rule was no longer feasible, and in a bid to survive in office authoritarian rulers adopted multi-party arrangements.

According to ([13], p. 2), “the early 1990s were a time of democratic optimism”. Like most sub-Saharan countries, Cameroon was greatly impacted by the ‘democratic wind of change’ that swept across the African continent in the 1990s [14]. Unlike the others, Cameroon did not descend into anarchy nor was the regime in place swept aside. Instead the regime headed by Cameroon’s second head of state, Paul Biya who succeeded Ahmadou Ahidjo following the latter’s resignation in 1982 reluctantly conceded to the legalisation of political parties and the re-introduction of multiparty elections. ‘Pluralism heightened the political stakes and reinvigorated electoral campaigns, in some cases transforming them into battlegrounds where a number of actors, including politicians, parties, traditional authorities, and ordinary citizens, fought it out, nonetheless, employing every available means including cash, cults and culinary items to gain votes’ ([15], p. 2).

Electoral periods in Cameroon therefore involve an impressive mobilisation of human, material and financial resources. Campaigning is marked by rallies, speeches and door-to-door solicitations. Other activities include, distribution of food items and party paraphernalia, as well as vote buying, intimidation, ballot box stuffing etc. At another level, electoral manipulation involves ‘gerrymandering,’ selective voter registration, tempering with the electoral roll and other administrative manoeuvres. At the centre of these activities is a group of people known locally

¹The North-West and South West Regions of Cameroon erstwhile known as the British Southern Cameroons and today named Ambazonia by activists fighting for the restoration of its statehood.

²Source: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroons-anglophone-crisis-dialogue-remains-only-viable-solution>

as the political elite. The definition of political elite in the context of this chapter is limited to former and serving government officials (ministers, administrators etc.), national and local level politician's businessmen and other stakeholders who belong to or are affiliated with the governing Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) party.

These elites notably the head of state Paul Biya, key cabinet members, government officials, and other politicians have been revolving around the state apparatus since independence in the 1960s. At the receiving end are grassroots populations, who over the years witnessed the political elite appear on the eve of elections and disappear immediately thereafter. However, on occasion, the grassroots are able to see through the mirage which often leaves some members of the political elite licking their wounds and others staring into the abyss. This chapter is based on my experiences of events around the 2013 municipal and legislative elections in Mbankomo an administrative sub-division in the Centre Region of Cameroon. I employed a number of methods including participant observation, document and archival analysis, interviews etc. to unearth and document the complex relationship between grassroots populations, party officials and other high ranking members of the governing CPDM during election periods in Cameroon.

2. Background

As noted in Section 1, this chapter is based on my experiences of the 2013 municipal and legislative elections in Mbankomo in the Centre Region of Cameroon. It all began in July 2013, when the president of Cameroon signed a decree convening the electoral corps. Article (I) stated that an election of Parliamentarians into the National Assembly and Councillors into Municipal Councils would take place on 30 September 2013. This announcement came at a time of renewed optimism in the electoral process following the introduction of biometric registration of voters on the electoral roll. On the one hand, it raised the hopes of many Cameroonians who were aspiring for meaningful political change via the ballot box. On the other hand, it set the ball rolling for a nationwide electoral contest that was full political machinations.

In the period leading up to the elections, I had exchanges with friends, conducted interviews and listened to media conversations and commentaries on the side-lines involving state officials, politicians and ordinary people. The general feeling was that with the advent of the biometric voting system, the electoral process in Cameroon might finally be credible. Many were hopeful that this system sounded the death knell for electoral fraud. People were very enthusiastic about the opportunity to effect real change, something that has eluded them for decades. Expectations of a free and fair election were espoused not only by members of the opposition, but also within the governing CPDM party. In fact some CPDM militants expressed optimism that the biometric voting system would definitively put an end to the negative image of the party as a vote rigging machine [16].

In the run-up to the elections, the chairman of the CPDM prescribed consensus as the method for selecting candidates. As will be discussed later on in this chapter, reaching consensus in many parts of the country was a major challenge not least in Mbankomo where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD. The main issue was that grassroots militants who expressed a wish to have certain candidates represent them in the municipality were brazenly thwarted by the party hierarchy.

3. Conceptualising the electoral arena in Cameroon

“For all their structural reliance on ruling parties, electoral authoritarian regimes often show personalistic traits and become deeply identified with the person controlling the chief executive office” ([17], p. 246).

In Cameroon, key members of the governing elite including the head of state have been shuttling around the state apparatus since independence in the 1960s [18]. The longevity of the Biya regime in power cannot be attributed to democratic credentials; rather it is linked to the ability to effectively subvert electoral rules. In fact, the government of Cameroon is renowned for having developed what is termed a ‘sophisticated rigging machinery’ that has ensured continued electoral success for the governing CPDM party in national and local elections since the 1990s [9, 12, 18]. Other than the change of leadership in 1982, there has not been any fundamental alteration in the system of governance in place since independence and reunification in 1960 and 1961 respectively. Effectively, it is a one man show where everything boils down to the head of state. He is the president of the ruling party, the head of the executive, the judiciary, and legislative branches of government; he is also the head of the army, police and other security services. The system is structured such that every action from the highest to the lowest echelons of the state apparatus is carried out on ‘the very high instructions of the head of state.’ Paradoxically, when things go wrong, everyone else but the head of state is blamed.

Meanwhile, the year 2018 is very important in the electoral calendar of Cameroon. A total of 4 elections are scheduled to take place, these include Senatorial, Municipal, Legislative and Presidential elections. Senatorial elections were held in March, 2018 for 70 out of 100 senators, the remaining 30 were appointed by the head of state. The governing CPDM party won 63 seats while the main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) party won 7 seats. Going by the results of the senatorial elections, and given that the CPDM party has won every election in the decades following the return to multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s, there is every reason to believe that the party is bound to maintain its tight grip in power.

Having weathered the political liberalisation of the 1990s without a significant threat to its hegemony, the governing elite in Cameroon skilfully combined authoritarian methods and democratic practices to maintain political power. In fact, the present electoral system is skewed in favour of the governing CPDM party which very often enters the electoral arena as strong contenders with very high chances of emerging victorious. This is due largely to what many observers have described as ‘electoral hold-up,’ specifically because the electoral timetable in Cameroon is the sole prerogative of the President who is often referred to by state media as the ‘sole master of the electoral calendar.’

The capacity of the electoral system to sustain the governing regime in Cameroon, and the quest by the government to maintain the status-quo makes it difficult to envisage any meaningful electoral reform that could lay the groundwork for free, fair, transparent and credible elections in the near future. Therefore, the electoral system in Cameroon could be described as a form of electoral authoritarianism whereby the ‘regime fills executive and legislative offices by elections, but the ruling party never loses elections’ ([13], p. 10). Electoral Authoritarianism in this context denotes a number of conditions, the first being that elections in Cameroon are broadly inclusive. In principle municipal, legislative and presidential elections are held regularly, under universal suffrage. The only exception being the Senatorial elections which as noted earlier is held under a two tier system i.e. indirect elections whereby 70% of senators are elected by municipal councillors and the remaining 30% are appointed by the head of state.

Secondly, elections in Cameroon are minimally pluralistic. Following the return to multipartism in the 1990s, opposition parties were allowed to openly compete for elective posts. However, in its design to fractionalise the opposition and weaken its strength, the government sponsored the formation of mushroom parties most of them allied to the governing CPDM. The result is the proliferation of opposition political parties numbering 305³ at the last count. Curiously, some of the mushroom political parties are made up of members of a nuclear family i.e. husband, wife and sometimes the children. The electoral system in Cameroon is therefore set-up such that the “hegemonic party permit other parties to exist but only as second class licensed parties thus foreclosing the possibility of an electoral loss by the hegemonic party” ([19], p. 34).

Thirdly, the political landscape in Cameroon is minimally competitive, i.e. the horde of opposition parties, while denied victory, is allowed to win votes and seats. On the one hand, opposition parties have minuscule representation in the National Assembly, Senate and Municipal Councils; some councils are controlled by the opposition, some are shared with other political parties including the CPDM, but majority of the Municipal Councils are controlled by the CPDM party. On the other hand, “by establishing multiparty elections for the highest office, Electoral Authoritarian regimes institute the concept of popular consent, even as they subvert it in practice” ([13], p. 12). In 1992, the candidate of the main opposition SDF party John Fru Ndi is widely believed to have won the presidential elections, however, the results was declared in favour of the incumbent President Paul Biya by the Supreme Court.

Fourthly, the political system in Cameroon is minimally open i.e. the opposition is not subject to massive repression as was the case during autocratic rule. In fact citizens are actively courted by the governing and opposition parties for votes because they are viewed as the “arbiters of last instance in the electoral arena.” However, when things turn sour particularly when election results are contested, opposition parties and civil society in general regularly experience repressive treatment by the police and military who are used in selective and intermittent ways by government officials as “the arbiters of the last instance over the electoral arena” ([13], p. 19).

The notion of electoral authoritarianism as applied in the context of Cameroon therefore involves the claim that the regime of Paul Biya is ‘neither democratic nor democratising but plainly authoritarian albeit in ways that depart from the forms of authoritarian rule’ that obtained prior to the democratic wind of change in the 1990s [13, 20]. Unlike during authoritarianism where everything boiled down to one-man rule, power in the context of multipartism ideally involves redistribution among those with vested interests such as ‘political parties and other interest groups. Multipartism also involves ‘institutionalised uncertainty’ and the presence of opposition parties that plays the role of ‘the conscience of the executive’ [21].

However, the financial, logistical and organisational limitations of the opposition in Cameroon prevent it from effectively challenging and defeating the governing CPDM through the ballot box. These and other shortcoming also inhibits the opposition from playing the role of ‘the conscience of the executive.’ On its part the executive in seeking to stamp-out any prospects of ‘institutional uncertainty’ in Cameroon governs the country through controlled multiparty elections whereby the CPDM party mobilises voters, and the state apparatus controls the elections. This Janus-faced action is designed to establish a pluralistic system that appears democratic on the surface, but is in reality is falling back to the one man-rule typical of authoritarian regimes.

³Source: Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation (MINATD). <<http://minatd.cm/index.php/en/en/annuaires/partis-politiques?view=partis>> accessed July 2018.

Despite its overwhelming dominance of the electoral arena in Cameroon, the governing CPDM party sometimes faces unprecedented internal challenges that threaten to tear it apart. The next section of this chapter will analyse a number of events that have occurred over the years between the political elite and grassroots militants. These events play out the vision of the chairman of the party and head of state to create a 'strong democracy whereby the elite lead the masses' [22]. Whereas actualising this 'vision' might have gone hitch-free during the monolithic era, it is proving to be much more challenging in the era of electoral authoritarianism.

4. Selection of candidates for the municipal and legislative elections

Following the official announcement of elections, the national president of the CPDM party issued a circular letter addressed to all militants in which he outlined the mode of selection of candidates to represent the party in the polls. The circular letter cited Article 23 of the constitution and basic texts of the party, which states that "the nomination of CPDM candidates for the parliamentary and municipal elections will revert to the Central Committee" [23].

The president's instructions to party militants were not very different from what obtained during authoritarian rule. Then, the political elite did not fail to remind militants seeking elective posts that their 'investiture' was thanks to the magnanimity of the party leadership and its illustrious leader, and not to their own efforts or the support of grassroots militants [18]. The circular goes on to state that selection by the central committee of the party will be done in conjunction with militants at the base, and will aim to encourage the emergence of honest and dynamic men, women and youths who can effectively convey to the grassroots the president's vision of transforming Cameroon into an emerging country by the year 2035. The circular ended with a call for the selection of candidates to be conducted in a spirit of openness, political maturity, objectivity and the quest for consensus [23].

Consensus was therefore a key element in the strategy of the CPDM party to mobilise grassroots militants for the 2013 municipal and legislative elections. As is the norm, the party hierarchy dispatched teams throughout the country to oversee the 'investiture' process. These teams were divided into two; one in charge of the municipal elections and another in charge of the legislative elections. Each team included; a president, a vice president, a coordinator, a *chargés des missions* and members [23]. In the run-up to the elections there was a beehive of activities throughout the country by party officials, administrative authorities and grassroots militants aimed at cementing the dominance of the CPDM party in the electoral arena in Cameroon.

4.1 Pre-electoral manoeuvrings

According to electoral regulations in Cameroon, the convening of the electoral corps effectively puts an end to registration of voters on the electoral list. This also marks the start of overt and covert manoeuvres by political parties to select or elect candidates to compete for various posts. Whereas campaigning officially kicks off 2 weeks before polling day, many observers felt the governing CPDM was already on the campaign trail as far back as 19th May 2011 [24].

In his traditional annual speech delivered on the eve of national day celebrated every 20th May, the head of state announced the issuing of national identity (ID) cards cost-free to all eligible Cameroonians. Similarly, he ordered the extension of the process a couple of months later in his usual end of year speech for 2012 [25]. The official reason advanced for this move was to accelerate the registration of

voters on the electoral lists, which was lagging ever since the process was announced in early 2011. In Cameroon, the ID card not only contains details (name, sex, date of birth, place of birth, etc.) of the bearer, but is essential for all official transactions. It is scrupulously controlled by security forces stationed along make-shift check-points on roads throughout the country.

The ID card is also an essential document for voter registration. However, inscription into the electoral register has been on a steady decline in the decades following the return to multiparty politics in the 1990s. Voter apathy is largely blamed on electoral fraud and a general feeling among many Cameroonians that the electoral process is fundamentally flawed to the point where change cannot be effected via the ballot box. As noted earlier, the current regime is a prolongation of the autocratic system created by Ahidjo which his successor Paul Biya has skilfully adapted into a 'democratic' environment [26].

Over the years, many citizens have lost faith in the electoral system because it is perceived to be incapable of effecting genuine political renewal in Cameroon. The 1992 presidential election was therefore seen as the turning point when Cameroonians, according to ([27], p. 114), "were made to understand that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants." This assessment is based on the widely held view that that election was won by the opposition SDF leader, John Fru Ndi, but declared in favour of the CPDM by the Supreme Court [28].

The then president of the Supreme Court was infamously associated with the phrase my hands are tied by the law. The inability of the Supreme Court to declare what many believed was the 'right result' i.e. the defeat of the incumbent head of state generated public uproar which degenerated into civil disobedience and violence for several years. The action by the Supreme Court of Cameroon not only bounded the fate of millions of Cameroonians to a regime that many people genuinely wanted out of power, but also strengthened the argument by ([29], p. 12), that "in the face of the global resurgence of democracy, [authoritarian regimes] are bending democracy into a strategy of power, using elections to disempower the people. And they are succeeding."

On another note, the press widely reported how thousands of uncollected ID cards littered Police stations throughout the country. One newspaper reported how the Divisional Officer (DO) of Ebolowa II in the president's home Region took it upon himself to tour villages in his administrative unit, personally handing out ID cards that had been abandoned in the South Regional capital, Ebolowa [30]. As the elections approached, other Divisional Officer's shifted gear from distributing ID cards to distributing voter cards. In Mbankomo, barely weeks after his installation, I accompanied the Divisional Officer on the last leg of his tour of the subdivision. In his address to the population, the DO performed the role of civil administrator and party official. He called on CPDM militants to be united and vigilant, and to massively register and turn out in throngs on polling day to vote for their party and President Paul Biya. His official delegation also included workers from the local branch of the election management body Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), and during each stopover their functions was to identify registered voters and hand out voter cards.

4.2 Meddling elite and discontented militants

State officials were not the only ones concerned about potential voter apathy. In a note addressed to party militants, the Secretary General of the CPDM appointed high-powered delegations of party bigwigs to the 10 regions of the country to sensitise and mobilise grassroots militants to collect voter cards [31]. This came

in the wake of a bruising investiture process in which many grassroots militants were enraged by the actions of some party bosses. The deployment of senior party officials to the field was not unusual. It is common practice during electoral periods in Cameroon for the public administration, i.e. ministerial departments and other public institutions to be emptied of high ranking bureaucrats. These public servants are deployed to their home regions and villages to campaign for the CPDM party. Dispatching such high level delegations on the eve of the 2013 municipal-legislative elections came amid generalised paranoia among party hierarchy over threats of widespread dissent and a possible party split. Despite official denials, it was hard to conceal the fact that these officials were sent out to persuade grassroots supporters enraged by what many perceived as treachery by elements of the political elite not to desert the party. Acrimony was so widespread that some loyal militants who lost out in the process not only pointed accusing fingers at party hierarchy but also expressed fears for the future of the party [16].

In Mbankomo, the outgoing Mayor sought the party endorsement to run for a second term, but his re-election bid was met with stiff opposition from another faction of the party that was favoured by the political elite. According to an informant and member of the outgoing Mayor's team the delegation sent-out by the CPDM party hierarchy to conduct the investiture process in Mbankomo was biased in favour of the Mayor's opponents and connived with them to frustrate his re-election bid. As discussed below, the candidates list of the outgoing Mayor was thrown out in a rather ignominious manner. Despite this setback, my informant remained steadfast to the party and reaffirmed his undying loyalty to party president, Paul Biya. He however, expressed fears that enraged grassroots militants might transform anger into negative votes which might cause the party to lose the elections in Mbankomo and other places around the country where other militants were equally aggrieved.⁴ These issues will be examined in greater details subsequently in the meantime I will examine how the investiture process played out in Mbankomo.

4.3 Contesting the party elite

On 11 July 2013, the CPDM central committee delegation responsible for the supervision of the investiture process in the Mefou and Akono Division descended on Mbankomo, where a meeting was scheduled in the municipal hall. This delegation was based at the divisional headquarters in Ngoumou, whence they visited other towns in the area for similar purposes. Initially slated for 13:00 the meeting finally started around 15:00. The meeting began with presentation of the rules for the investiture of candidates by the party chairman Paul Biya. The militants present were cautioned that aspirants whose documents did not conform to the electoral code would be disqualified by ELECAM. They were also reminded that candidates would be selected via consensus lists, and the list will be forwarded to the party headquarters for approval. The militants present in the hall were asked not to pay the requisite caution fee of CFA 50.000 FRS, but to have the cash handy and wait for the appropriate moment [16].

Following this brief presentation, the floor was opened for questions and comments. The first question from the audience sought clarification from the party delegates about who was authorised to sign the attestation of residence; this person was confused about the competent authority to legalise this document. One of the party delegates responded that under normal circumstances it was the responsibility of the legal department, but due to time constraints the signature of the Divisional Officer was sufficient. The next issue was the competent authority to legalise a

⁴Personal communication 07/12/2013.

birth certificate, the answer to that question was that it is the responsibility of the Mayor or civil status registrar of the person's place of birth. This was confirmed by the outgoing Mayor who expressed his availability to sign birth certificates without delay [16].

Following the outgoing Mayors clarification, the head of the central committee delegation stated that their job was to collect the list of ruling party candidates aspiring to contest the municipal elections for Mbankomo council. He added that the party chairman had recommended investiture of candidates via consensus lists. He also stated that the most important part of the meeting was to select the 25 members that will contest the municipal elections in Mbankomo on the CPDM party list. Another member of the central committee delegation stated that prior to their arrival in Mbankomo they were informed that preparatory meetings had taken place between different branches of the party (Youth, Women and Men) in Mbankomo [16]. These meetings were held in the presence of a party elite and former Minister, however, the stakeholders failed to come up with a consensus. As a result, three of the four list leaders agreed to fuse into one, but the outgoing Mayor declined to associate with them.

Following this remark, the chairman opened the floor for comments, questions and clarifications. The first hand that went up was that of the youth-wing or Y-CPDM president. He argued that not every local stakeholder was invited to the meetings at the former Minister's residence and as a result it was unfair to hold decisions taken at that meeting to be representative of everyone's opinions. He added that any consensus list should take into consideration the hard work of local CPDM youths who had made lots of sacrifices to represent the party at public events in Mbankomo, despite limited support from the political elite. The next person to take the floor was a man describing himself as a member of the local elite. He said the groundwork for the meeting was laid in the presence of everyone and that the statement by the Y-CPDM president was simply absurd. He added that everything had been sorted out and that the Y-CPDM president had to accept things the way they are. He then urged the Y-CPDM president to lay his political ambitions aside and join him to work for the unity of the party [16].

Responding to the controversy, the head of the central committee delegation stated that the party hierarchy sent them out to seek unity and solidarity among grassroots militants and to oversee the selection of 25 people who will continue the achievements of the outgoing team. He added that the central committee will have the final say about who is elected as councillor and will designate a Mayor among them, but for the moment the objective was to designate candidates that will form the consensus list. He also reminded the audience that Mbankomo Council requires 25 not 50 councillors and that the numbers cannot be multiplied to suit personal ambitions [16]. At that point, a suggestion was made that the contending list leaders select two people each to enter into a conclave and come up with a consensus list. Both sides accepted the suggestions and the meeting was suspended to reconvene at 18:00.

4.4 Intractable conclave: conversations on the sidelines

I returned to the venue at 18:00, but it seemed the 'white smoke' from the conclave that will signify 'consensus' between the factions vying for the CPDM candidates list for the municipal elections in Mbankomo was a long way off. While waiting for the contending parties to return, I struck-up conversations with some Y-CPDM militants who like me were watching the events unfold from the side-lines. The content of our conversations centred on the municipal and legislative elections in general and the reasons for the turmoil within the CPDM in Mbankomo and other places around the country.

One of my interlocutors, Onana (pseudonym), started off by listing the two main criteria for choosing candidates for the party, i.e. election via party primaries or selection most often by consensus. In 2007, the CPDM party designated its candidates via party primaries; however, in 2013, it was done by consensus. As discussed later, the choice of consensus was designed to avoid a repetition of events of 2007 where prominent members of the political elite were rejected by grassroots militants in several constituencies around the country.

According to this contact, selection of the 25 candidates for the 2007 municipal elections on the CPDM ticket began at the base, during which each tribal grouping comes up with its quota of candidates to make up the sociological components of the area. According to Section 151 (3) of the electoral code, “each list shall take into consideration the various sociological components of the constituency concerned...”⁵ However, this law is quite vague about the meaning of the term ‘sociological components,’ leaving it to various interpretations. This hazy clause is often employed by electoral officials mainly as a justification for rejecting opposition party lists. Following the selection of candidates at the base, the list was forwarded to party headquarters, where it was discovered that names of many grassroots militants were removed, and replaced with the names of members of the political elite who mainly reside in the capital Yaoundé roughly 20 km away. This, according to Onana did not go down well with the grassroots militants and almost ‘led to a revolution in Mbankomo.’⁶

Many people were angry at what they perceived as deliberate undermining of their choice of candidates by the party hierarchy in favour of those who are merely seeking their selfish political gains. Moreover, he went on, these outsiders only think of the grassroots during election periods and, after securing their mandates, quickly scarp off and no-one hears from them until elections are approaching again. Frustrated by such disingenuous practices, grassroots militants in 2007 decided to teach them a lesson during the party primaries.

Another interlocutor, Abogo (pseudonym), was frustrated that other councils in the area had already selected candidates, but Mbankomo always had problems because of meddling by the political elite. Pressed on the issue of meddling by the elites, he cited the furore that ensued following nationwide primaries held by the CPDM in the lead-up to the 2007 municipal elections. Back then, many prominent members of the CPDM party were humiliated and denied electoral franchise by grassroots militants. A notorious casualty of this revolt was the president of the National Assembly who in 2007 lost the party primaries in his local constituency in the Mayo Sava Division in the Extreme North of Cameroon, but was reinstated by the CPDM central committee. According to Abogo, the actions of the Central Committee greatly infuriated grassroots militants who viewed it as a blatant violation of their right to select credible people to represent them in key state and local institutions. He expressed fears that a similar action might be in the offing in Mbankomo.⁷

Unlike in 2007, Cameroon’s political calendar in 2013 featured municipal, legislative and senatorial elections. The creation of the Senate in 2013 wrought fundamental changes in the hierarchical order at the helm of the state. According to Article 6(4) of the constitution, the President of the Senate is next in line to fill the post of head of state, albeit temporarily in case of a vacancy for reasons of illness, death or resignation. Prior to the creation of the Senate in 2013, the role of ‘constitutional successor’ was the preserve of the president of the National Assembly who in terms of state protocol was the second personality

⁵Law No. 2012/001 of 19 April 2012, on the Electoral Code of Cameroon.

⁶Personal Communication, 11 July 2013.

⁷Personal Communication, 11 July 2013.

of the state. This constitutional provision allows the individuals at the helm of the state during this delicate period to preside over the transition, but not put themselves up for election; however, they could prove to be a vital king-maker. With the advent of the Senate as the upper chamber of parliament, the role of temporary successor automatically shifted from the National Assembly to the Senate President [16].

Considering that he was rejected by grassroots militants in 2007 but forcefully reinstated by party hierarchy. The President of the National Assembly viewed the Senate as an opportunity to move away from direct dependence on grassroots militants and ‘universal suffrage’ for his political survival to an ‘electoral college’ made up of a selected number of municipal councillors. He also probably conjectured the opportunity of being appointed by the head of state into the Senate, because, as noted earlier, the latter has the constitutional prerogative to appoint 30 out of 100 senators that make up the upper chamber of the Cameroon legislature. In a desperate but ultimately futile attempt to maintain himself as the second personality of the State, ‘the MP from the Mayo Sava constituency sought to be a candidate for the Upper House. Unfortunately, his application was rejected by the CPDM party’s national nomination commission presided over by the party chairman President Paul Biya [32].’

It should be noted that in Cameroon, senators are voted by an electoral college that consists of Municipal Councillors. As a result, it is much easier for the political elite (as was observed during the 2013 and 2018 senatorial elections) to sway this select group of voters with financial and other material incentives to vote for them, than is the case with the mass of ordinary voters. In the months after the rejection of his senatorial bid, there was wild speculation that the president of the National Assembly whose mandate as parliamentarian was nearing its end was heading towards political oblivion. However, just like the mythical phoenix, his candidacy was endorsed by the party hierarchy, and he rose from the ashes to stage a remarkable comeback following the 2013 legislative elections, this time around in the position of the 3rd personality of the state and president of the National Assembly, a post he held since 1992. The next section of this chapter returns to the intractable conclave in Mbankomo to examine the outcome of the clash between the contending lists for the 2013 municipal elections.

4.5 Investiture without consensus

The conclave to select a consensus list to run for the CPDM party in Mbankomo ended late at night. The day after I met a key informant who took part in the meeting to find out whether the leaders of the conflicting factions finally agreed to form a consensus list. This informant had on previous occasions informed me that he was the chairman of the economic and social affairs committee of the outgoing council team and a close personal friend of the Mayor whose re-election bid was the subject of a robust challenge.

I was very keen to know what the shape of the consensus list looked like. He began by stating the obvious, that the meeting stretched beyond the time allotted and after intense negotiations both sides were still unable to reach a compromise. As a result the incumbent Mayor’s list of which he was a member and that supported by the political elite was forwarded that same night to the departmental committee in Ngoumou. At Ngoumou, the incumbent Mayor’s list was rejected for being incomplete.

“How is this possible...? He fumed, how can people collect a file containing documents that were complete and verified and by the time it gets to its destination it is

found to be incomplete? How is this possible...? You see how these people (referring to the central committee delegation) are rubbing us of our rights as militants of the CPDM. I could tell that something was fishy in the hall when he (the head of the central committee delegation) publicly asked both sides not to pay the caution money of 50,000, despite being aware that the fees for the opposition list had been paid.”⁸

Asked how the plot unfolded, he said a lot of underhand tactics were employed by their adversaries in the dying minutes of the conclave. Thus, before it was decided that two lists be forwarded to the departmental committee, both sides almost reached consensus, but discussion broke down over who would head such a list. When it finally arrived in Ngoumou, on examining the Mayor's list, it turned out to be incomplete because some documents were missing, while those of his opponents were complete. Days after the deadline for submission of documents to ELECAM had passed, the missing documents were discovered on the grounds of a secondary school in Yaoundé several kilometres from where they were deposited [16].

Not everybody was aggrieved by the outcome of the investiture process in Mbankomo. Another informant and CPDM militant I regularly interacted with during my research and who described himself as a supporter of the political elite was not very surprised at the outcome of the conclave. He said everyone from the Divisional Officer, former and current Ministers and other personalities who hail from the area were not very fond of the outgoing Mayor and his team, but could not really do much to get rid of them until the appropriate moment. He described the Mayor as an ‘absentee landlord’ who only appears when important personalities are visiting town or during public events such as the installation of the DO. He equally accused the mayor of abandoning the day-to-day management of the council to some auxiliaries and other individuals who were in his private pay. For example, he had a personal assistant who was not a member of the council staff and this person was not accountable to anybody except the Mayor. According to my informant, the Mayor also failed to delegate responsibility to his two official deputies as required by law.⁹

5. Conclusion

It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that 2018 is an important electoral year in Cameroon. In line with the initial calendar, legislative, municipal, senatorial and presidential elections were scheduled to take place. Senatorial elections were held in March 2018, municipal and legislative elections were postponed for 1 year, and presidential elections are scheduled for October 2018. The official reasons for the postponement of the legislative and municipal elections was a ‘congested electoral calendar’ however, many observers believe that the worsening security situation in the English-speaking North-West and South-West Regions makes it almost impossible for the conduct of elections based on universal suffrage. The question that therefore arises is why organise presidential elections which like the legislative and municipal elections that was postponed, are based on universal suffrage, even though, chances are the elections will not be effective in the two English Speaking areas of the country that are seeking to breakaway?

⁸Personal communication 07/12/2013.

⁹Personal communication 07/13/2013.

That question like the issue of organising elections at a period when the country is embroiled in a profound crisis that is fast degenerating into a civil war remains contentious. However, many supporters of the governing regime argue that there is no clause in the electoral code that stipulates that presidential elections or indeed any elections must be held throughout the national territory for the results to be deemed legitimate. This therefore brings up another question. Why postpone the legislative and municipal elections and proceed with presidential elections if the legitimacy of the process is not affected by the prospects of elections not being organised throughout the country? The answer to this question not only lies in the intricacies of the crisis situation in the North-West and South-West Regions of the country, but also in the believe by the electoral authoritarian regime in Cameroon that its legitimacy is not necessarily based on the results of elections but on its manipulative skills.

The announcement of the presidential elections generated a lot of debate and also speculation about whether the 84 years old President who has been in power for 36 years will run again. On the one hand, some opposition figures and civil society expressed the wish that the incumbent Paul Biya should not seek another 7 years mandate, but should instead organise free, fair transparent elections that will lead to a smooth transition of power. On the other hand, militants of the CPDM boasted that Biya is their 'natural candidate' and were in no doubt about the eventuality of him declaring his candidature before the expiration of the deadline, something he eventually did via twitter on Friday 13th July 2018.

In October 2018 therefore, Cameroonians will be heading to the polls to elect a new president. This will be exactly 26 years from the highly acrimonious 1992 presidential elections. Just like on previous occasions, the opposition is heading in to the electoral arena in dispersed ranks which greatly reduces its chances of electoral success. Not wanting to leave anything to chance, the government on its part has embarked on the usual divide, weaken and conquer strategy.

Following internecine squabbles within three opposition parties, the Interior Minister issued a communique which surreptitiously declared three individuals that were contesting the leadership of their respective parties as the only individuals officially authorised to represent the said parties. Few days after the minister's communique, the 'officially recognised' party leaders in collaboration with a horde of other politicians came out publicly to pledge their support for the candidacy of President Paul Biya. Curiously, one of the deposed party leaders who sought to counter the minister's declaration was denied the authorization to organise a public event, and on the day of the said event, the party headquarters was surrounded by heavily armed policemen and soldiers bent on ensuring the event did not happen.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of Interest.

Notes/thanks/other declarations

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Author details

Numvi Gwaibi

Freelance Writer, Bamenda, North-West Region, Cameroon

*Address all correspondence to: numviv@gmail.com

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