Contemporary Cameroon: Politics and feasibility of democracy

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Welcome!

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about politics in Cameroon and the prospects of the democratic society in our country.

I have been in politics in Cameroon for quite some time. For now I am just a consultant; observing and commenting on what goes on in the country.

On 4th July, we were invited by the American Ambassador to celebrate American Independence Day with him. There, he reminded us as he had done several times before, that his country had independence on 4 July 1776, and of the Constitutional Conference in Philadelphia in Feb 1787 and the formal coming to force of the constitution on March 4 1789. Following the adoption, the Bill of rights was incorporated in the constitution in 1791. Even then, there was not even the mention of slavery that was a scourge at that time; and women and 18-year olds did not yet have the vote. He reminded us that today in the US, there is no slavery; women and 18-year olds have the vote. This progress was due to the struggle of Americans: advocacy groups, individuals and victories scored in a string of test cases in courts across the country.

Ambassador Niels Marquartd who left Cameroon last Saturday was using the occasion of 4 July to repeat his message to Cameroonians that he used every opportunity to repeat: that democracy is a process; whatever the shortcomings today, it takes citizens, advocacy groups and institutions to win victories that build the democratic culture.

Reading through American political history, I note that the country went through what is described as a double revolution before the stage was set for the gains that have been made since 1776. The first revolution was the declaration of independence. Power of the sovereign people was delegated to the states and popular assemblies in the hope that the homogenous people that were freed from the yoke of the king would govern themselves well.

The second revolution came when the image of the naturally good and unified society was challenged by the failures of the states and assemblies to run the affairs of the people to their satisfaction. This why there was the Constitutional conference that gave birth to a Constitution and the form of state that the USA has today. The Constitution ensures Separation of powers// Checks and balances// Federalism, which promote freedom and opportunity.

All this tells us that politics is concerned with the way in which the citizens of a country manage their daily affairs. Such management takes place within a political framework which evolves following the daily experiences of the citizens.
It can be said that a **democratic society** is one in which this political framework is **open to challenge and change**. This is why Democracy is usually said to be a **discussion**. Democracy is about openly and freely discussing the goings-on in the society.

**Democracy works** where there is tolerance of the different points of view expressed during such free and open discussion; where diversity is encouraged. **It fails** where there is intolerance of divergent views; where some of the divergent groups/individuals seek to triumph over opponents, rather than seek consensus.

**All humans are capable of attaining democratic culture.**
- But it must be **nurtured** for it to take root.
- It cannot come about spontaneously. It cannot be brought about by wars to defeat the enemies of democracy!
- It cannot be declared or legislated!

**Cameroon is governed like an American State**
- **The sovereign people delegate their power to elected and appointed officials** for the day to day running of government at National and local levels;
- In Cameroon, what is done at the local level is dictated from the top; not so in the US.
- In Cameroon, party politics is felt at the local level; not so in the US.
- Like in the US, Cameroon is a **diverse society**: Anglophones; Francophones, Christians, Moslems, over Ethnic groups

Americans held a constitutional conference in 1787. Cameroon held a constitutional conference in 1961. The difference is that the American discussed for a long time; in Cameroon there was virtually no discussion.

The Consequence for Cameroon of adopting and constitution that was not adopted by consensus is that the constitution is unstable: it has been “amended” several times, to change the name of the country and the form of state. It will certainly be changed tomorrow because **each political party has its own “proposed” constitution for the country**.

**Judicial power:**
- In the US, the Constitutions demands lifetime appointment of justices of the Supreme Court and other federal judges; Federal judges hold office during good behaviour.
- In Cameroon, the Constitution directs that the president of the republic shall guarantee the independence of the judicial power; he appoints members of the Bench and of the legal dept. Therefore although the Constitution of Cameroon provides for checks and balances, there is none in practice.

**Length of tenure of office of the President:**
- 1st President of US in 1789; now 42nd.
For Cameroon 1st 1960 (22 years); now 2nd (25 years)....

So is democracy feasible in Cameroon? Well, some people say that values like individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state... are "Western" values, meaning values of the western world. According to such people, Africa has to learn from the West how to be civilised by acquiring these values. This perception has bred much hostility and resentment, because it adds to the efforts of some western scientists and historians to distort "world history" to evacuate Africa from the central position as the origin of civilisation. This resentment and hostility have led in some quarters to the unnecessary contrasting of some modern democratic values with African cultures; like cooperation versus individualism, majority rule versus consensus, etc. It is this blind effort to contrast that brought about the one-party regimes we least needed in Cameroon and Africa.

We think that these human values are not exclusive but inclusive. As we have said above, all humans are capable of attaining democratic culture. It just has to be nurtured. It cannot be imposed. The going-on in the Cameroon society show both resistance and receptivity. Your very presence here is an indication that sooner or later, the resistance will collapse and the Cameroon society will be open to free and open discussion that allows everybody to say what they are doing, what is best to be done rather than to submitting to what somebody dictates to them to do. Yes, democracy is feasible in Cameroon!