

SDF and Typology of Political Violence in the Northwest, Cameroon Since 1990

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Abstract

Review Article

The birth of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in Bamenda, North West Province on May 26, 1990, did not leave many Cameroonians indifferent. Many were anxious to know the founder, objectives, ideology and prospects of the party. In fact, the SDF incarnated hope amongst the people but unfortunately the almost three decades of the party's existence could be described as "wasted years" because the SDF failed to conquer power and implement its social democracy. The objective of this study is to identify violence as the main source of SDF predicaments. The methodology used is descriptive and the analysis of the data collected from secondary sources and interviews reveals that although the party was confronted with many challenges, it lost popularity mainly because the leaders and their opponents used or misused mass protests, civil disobedience, political assassinations at the detriment of the SDF. The SDF is therefore merely a shadow of itself today and may eventually disappear from the political scene if care is not taken.

Keywords: SDF, Violence, Democracy, Politics, Cameroon.

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INTRODUCTION

The background to the birth of the SDF can better be stretched back to the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon at the end of the Cameroon campaign of the First World War in 1916. In 1916, Anglo-French forces defeated Germany and ousted them from the Kamerun Protectorate. The territory was partitioned into two unequal halves; the British occupying a fifth constituted as British Cameroon and the French assuming four-fifths referred to as French Cameroun. When the war ended, the international community recognised the partition and requested Britain and France to administer their respective portions as mandate territories of the League of Nations. The new international boundary came to be called the Oliphant-Picot line in honour of Lancelot Oliphant, a British diplomat and George Picot a French diplomat who in a meeting in London in February 1916, initiated the partition by drawing a line on the map of Cameroon from Lake Chad to the Mungo River. The partition was finalised by the Milner-Simon Agreement of July 10, 1919.

The Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon gained additional international status when Britain further partitioned British Cameroons into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons

and integrated the two portions into Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria respectively. In fact, from 1922, the Oliphant-Picot line, with some cosmetic modifications, became the boundary between British Nigeria and French Cameroun because British Southern and British Northern Cameroons were integral parts of the British colony of Nigeria.

During this period, the territory was administered as part of the British colony of Nigeria and the people adopted some aspects of the British system of education, the common law judicial system and the Anglo-Saxon culture (Ndi, 2005:18). This greatly alienated them from their "brothers" in French Cameroun who were introduced to the Napoleonic code and the highly centralised French system of administration. In 1960, French Cameroun gained independence as the Republic of Cameroun and in October 1961 the British Southern Cameroons gained independence by reunification with the Republic of Cameroun. The two-state federation (West and East Cameroon) created by this reunion was a multiparty state but in 1966 President Ahidjo used shrewd diplomacy to convince Foncha, Muna and Endeley political party leaders in West Cameroon, to dissolve their political parties and accompany Ahidjo's *Union Camerounaise* (UC) to form

a Grand National Party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU) (Ngoh, 1996:240). This marked the end of multiparty democracy and the highly cherish Anglo-Saxon (West Cameroon) practice of parliamentary democracy¹. In 1972, the Federation was abolished and a unitary state with all institutions centralised in Yaounde created. In 1984 the new President of the United Republic of Cameroon, Paul Biya renamed the country the Republic of Cameroon, the name French Cameroun had before the 1961 reunification. The Anglophones of the former British Southern Cameroons and later West Cameroon, treated this constitutional reform and others since 1961 as attempts at assimilations. Even Biya's creation of Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) in Bamenda, March 1985, to replace the CNU did not seem to usher in any hope for Anglophones in a Republic dominated demographically and politically by Francophones.

It was with this background that some Anglophone activists took advantage of the economic malaise and social distress in Cameroon in the late 1980s to reflect on the formation of a party that could protect the Anglophone identity or Anglophone interest in a demographically and politically Francophone dominated Cameroon.

One of the Anglophone activists who suffered persecution from the Yaounde regimes and who founded the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone secessionist group, Albert Mukong was the first to make the move towards the creation of the SDF. He contacted Dr Lawrence Fomambuh and Dr Siga Asanga who recommended John Fru Ndi as an ally in the struggle for Anglophone liberation (Mbah, 2018:16). The first Albert Mukong- Fru Ndi contact resulted in the decision to create a party. This coincided with Anglophone students protest against discrimination in the University of Yaounde and the circulation of their protest letters in the Anglophone Provinces. Carlson Anyangwe and Clement Ngwasiri all university dons joined the team. The first formal meeting of the founding fathers held on November 11, 1989 in Bamenda. At the meeting, Mukong lamented on the plight of Anglophones in Cameroon (Mbah, 2018:17). On December 1, 1989, Dr Siga Asanga hosted the second meeting in Yaounde. On February 17, 1990 the third meeting held in Fru Ndi's residence in Bamenda. In March 1990, a file was submitted to government requesting the authorisation of the Social Democratic Front. The founding fathers again met at Nyo'o Wakai 's residence to finalise plan for the

launch of the party and on May 26, 1990, the SDF was launched. The launching rally was banned but the courageous John Fru Ndi went ahead to defy state authority and the military to proclaim the birth of his party.

TYPOLOGIES OF SDF VIOLENCE

Civil Disobedience

One of the forms of violence practiced in the North West Region from 1990 was civil disobedience. It should be noted that civil disobedience as a form of violence began in India in 1930 under the tutelage of Mahatmat Gandhi against the British rule. Here, he launched the civil disobedience movement because Lord Irwin ignored his eleven demands including the abolition of the salt tax. Here, he started the civil disobedience with the famous Dandi march on March 12, 1930. Other areas quickly copied the form of violence and it was witnessed in Bamenda, during the 1990s launching of the SDF political part, presidential elections and 2016 during the uprising of the anglophone crisis. Before we continue, it is imperative for us to understand the 'meaning of civil disobedience.

In general, it is the refusal to obey the demands and commands of a government without resorting to violence or active measures of opposition. It is usually purpose to force concessions from the government or occupying power. civil disobedience has been a major tactic and philosophy of nationalist movement in Africa and India. Civil disobedience was as well witnessed in America during the civil right movement organized by Martin Luther kings. Thus, it is a symbolic or ritualistic violation of the law rather than a rejection of a system as a whole. These movements in the 1990s Bamenda was championed by SDF under the chairmanship of Ni John Fru Ndi in an attempt to fully ensure the restoration of democracy. This could be the reason why Konings argued that the launching of SDF party in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Region of Cameroon on May 26th, 1990 was a landmark of civil disobedience that directly challenged the one-party rule of president Paul Biya. This initial event was followed by brother sustained campaigns of civil disobedience across Anglophone regions, most notably "operation ghost towns". [2] The key reason of this disobedience as outlined by "The Cameroon post" newspaper was due to the government attempt to ban all opposition political parties. [3]

Despite this, Ni John Fru Ndi the new opposition leader presided with the rally at the Ntarikon

¹ It was in the British Southern Cameroons that the opposition defeated the incumbent and ruling party for the first time in the history of democratic elections in Black Africa. This was at the 1959 general elections when the Kamerun National Democratic Party of John Ngu Foncha defeated the Kamerun National Congress of Emmanuel Endeley and Foncha took over from Endeley as Prime Minister of the Southern Cameroons

² Konings, P. 1996 "The Post-Colonial State and Economic and Political Reforms in Cameroon", in J. Fernandez & A. Momme (eds.), *Liberalization in the Developing World. Institutional and Economic Changes in Latin America, Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge): 283-291.

³ Cameroon Post 1991 No. 76, July 8-11.

motor park which attracted heavy security presence. With this security forces clashed with the large crowd of supporters, resulting in the death of six young people. These deaths fueled further anger and galvanized the opposition movement. As a result, Fru Ndi delivered a historic speech emphasizing that “democracy has never been handed to the people on a platter of gold” and calling on citizens to fight for their right. This made the north west region to become an epicenter of sustained campaign of civil disobedience. The first form of civil disobedience was manifested through “operation ghost town” (ville mortes). Here, activities in the north west region became stand still. No transport agency was to carry out their business, all the shops in Bamenda were to be closed and everybody was expected to stay at home. Thus, this halted and partly paralyzed the economic activities. This mechanism was to force the government to conduct reforms to democracy. [4]

The other forms of civil disobedience were through protest and rallies. Here, the SDF and supporters organized civil disobedience and rallies often meet with forceful response from the state. The general population engaged in various forms of resistance including mob actions and civil strives, challenging the authority of the ruling party and some traditional rulers seen as aligns with the government. In the aftermath of the proclamation of the 1992 presidential election results, there was general turmoil and restoring law and order proved knotty for administrative authorities in Bamenda. [5] To arrest the situation, the opposition leader of the SDF was placed under house arrest. As one informant declared, these actions were considered to be draconian, repressive and directed at their “illustrious son” whom they were cocksure had won the 1992 presidential elections. Most members of the society interpreted the declaration of the state of emergency on the North West Province as the Biya regime’s punishment to the province for their unflinching support to the SDF party. An informant, declared that they could not abandon Mr. Ndi in the cold at these very trying moments of the democratic struggle. Their resolve was unshakeable considering the impoverishment that their sons and daughters were immersed in. [6]

Gender based violence

Another form of violence used in the North West Region of Cameroon by the SDF was gender-based violence manifested in the likes of Takumbeng. It should be noted that since the inception of Bamenda Grassfields, women have been very active in political, economic and

social issues. This was witnessed through notable gender groups like Takumbeng. Takumbeng, reconstituted an institutional form of militancy leading to a deeper network of associational life that transcends ethnic frontiers. Even more laudable, are the use of traditional symbolic rituals, mystical powers and the strategy of shaming. [7] Coupled with their collective resolve and sheer commitment to social justice, they have left indelible imprints. These may be insignificant gains but their dedication to the course of social justice is salutary and can serve as an eye opener to the role of people power in Cameroon’s botched democratic process. Takumbeng enabled both rural and urban women to readapt and use an indigenous institution to address issues of governance under a post-colonial regime. While its precursors, Anlu and Fubeuen occurred in rural setting, the Takumbeng which is a secret society was cut at the interphase between the rural and urban divide in which post-menopausal women participated. [8,9]

Diduk content that it emerged in the wake of Cameroon political liberation in the early 1990s. Jua provided an inside into the roots of Takumbeng, terming it as a highly respected and a powerful female association. It takes its name from the society of princes in the Bafut fondom. Though activist came from at least 16 different fondoms especially within the 30miles radios of the regional capital Bamenda. The women were mostly post-menopausal women who it is believed had given birth and need not be carefully protected against witchcraft or a sorcerer’s harmful medicines which can cause infertility, still-births or physically deformed children.⁹ Awasom supports that this explains why women who had already attained menopause spearheaded female political activism since they were free from excessive household chores. Post-menopausal women often exercise considerable influence and are sometimes able to assume ritual or political roles that were formerly denied to them. Being post-menopausal is consistent with a cultural precept that ascribes deference, mystical prowess and fortitude to the elderly. [10] According to Diduk these older “mothers” have far greater moral and mystical authority than do other women. Their nudity does not imply vulnerability as they relied on mystical powers and rituals that are common with secret societies that spell doom for defaulters. They are tolerated because it is ominous for any onslaughts to be directed at them. [11]

In the wake of 1990s demonstration to sympathized with the democratic and liberation

⁴Konings, P. 1996 “The Post-Colonial State and Economic and Political Reforms in Cameroon”,

⁵Cameroon Post 1991

⁶ Ibid

⁷Ardener, S.1975 “Sexual Insult and Female Militancy”, in S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women* (London: Malaby Press). DOI : 10.2307/2800319

⁸Ardener, S.1975 “Sexual Insult and Female Militancy”,

⁹ Diduk, S. 1989 *Women’s Agricultural Production and Political Action in the Cameroon Grassfields, Africa* 59 (3): 338-355.

¹⁰ Awasom, S.2002 *A Critical Survey of the Resuscitation, Activation, and Adaptation of Traditional African*

Female Political Institutions to the Exigencies of Modern Politics in the 1990s: The case of the Takumbeng

movement in Bamenda, women represented Takumbeng from Akum, Bafut, Bambili, Bambui, Kijem Keku, Kejem kethingho, Mendakwe, Chomba, Mbatu, Nkwen and Santa. The group was composed mostly of urbanities from these ethnic groups around Bamenda. In this regard, Takougang and Krieger observed that the road of Takumbeng involved female elders in the past with the presumed connection of *Anlu*, *Febeun* and other Grassfield roots female movements. Their existence encouraged women and gave them the strength to come together collectively to defend traditional and political right. [12] Takougang and Krieger as well note that *Takumbeng* came into the spotlight during Cameroons struggled transition to multiparty politics in the early 1990s, the 1991 ghost towns operations and the state of emergency declared in Bamenda from October 27, 1992. Jua content that, the *Takumbeng* surrounded the compound of Ni John Fru Ndi the chairman of SDF who was placed under house arrest in the after math of the presentation of the results of the 1992 presidential election. [13]

As noted earlier, the *Takumbeng* came into the limelight in the 1990s on the heels of political liberalization in Cameroon that ushered in a new democratic dispensation. This was occasioned by the clamor for multiparty politics spearheaded by the Social Democratic Front Party (SDF). As a result of pressure mounted on government, in December 1990, the Biya regime formally sanctioned the existence of multiparty. Also, the 1990 Law on freedom of association endorsed the holding of public meetings and demonstrations so far as they did not pose a threat to public peace. [14]

These actions were premeditated given that the coalition of opposition parties were stepping up demands for the government to convene a sovereign national conference in order to better define the rules of the game in the new political dispensation. The intransigence of the regime in place led to a series of protestations by opposition parties. The end result was civil disobedience campaigns, ghost town operations and other forms of economic sabotage geared at forcing the regime to comply. The *Takumbeng's* debut was during the Dead country operations and other acts of civil disobedience that ensued. However, the informants indicated that they were embittered with the killing of six innocent citizens on the 26th of May 1990, when the SDF party was being launched in Bamenda. This triggered some contemplation of action and mobilization by the *Takumbeng* to examine the crisis that had escalated. [15]

Eyewitness accounts underscore the fact that the group gained momentum during the ghost town operations by distributing tracts to re-enforce total compliance of civil disobedience activities. They also sensitized the public on the need to resist all undemocratic practices. The resuscitation of the

Takumbeng was occasioned by what some of the members decried, inter alia as the wanton killings of their children, Anglophone marginalization, illegal arrests,

Female Society in Cameroon, Paper presented at the 10th General Assembly of Codesria, Kampala, Uganda, 8th-12th December, 2002.

¹¹Diduk, S. 1989 Women's Agricultural Production and Political Action in the Cameroon Grassfields,

¹²Takougang, J. & Krieger, M.1998 African State and Society in the 1990s: Cameroon's Political Crossroads (Boulder: Westview Press). DOI : 10.4324/9780429502514

¹³Takougang, J. & Krieger, M.1998 African State and Society in the 1990s:

¹⁴ Ibid

[15] Awasom, S.2002 A Critical Survey of the Resuscitation victimization of law-abiding citizens because of their political leanings. As mothers, they were at a loss as to why the regime in place opted for repressive measures instead of engaging opposition parties in meaningful dialogue. Matha Chaghiay put it:

As life givers, they could not remain indifferent to the sufferings of the masses. They could only show their condemnation of such inhumane practices by protesting. They could not be unsympathetic to their children dying in the streets for want of a genuine democracy. The pains of childbirth and pangs of motherhood urge women to create order where chaos is imminent. [11]

Members were of Takumbeng quickly rallied at short notices when the group was contemplating action. As they move passed the neighborhoods, others joined the rungs. As indicated by post newspapers, the group performed traditional rituals before any outing. However, their activities were perceived differently by neo-traditional authorities. The Fon of Mankon who had inclinations with the ruling party (as first Vice President) denounced the activities of the group especially their unalloyed support to the opposition SDF. [12] This created some friction between the ruler and the society since their activities centrally under his fondom became intractable.

Several attempts were made by the Fon to forestall the performance of the *Takumbeng*. The group was caught between allegiance to a traditional ruler, an adherent of the ruling party and to the opposition SDF crusader of democracy. With the advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon, the neutrality of chiefs as paragons of tradition became eroded as they indulged in partisan politics. The traditional power of some chiefs and fons was put to serious test in the new democratic dispensation. [13] This was the state of affairs between

¹¹ Interview with Chaghiay Matha, 76, member of Takumbeng, 12th July 2024

¹² Interview with Chaghiay

¹³ Idem

the Fon of Mankon and the *Takumbeng*. Moreover, some prominent elite of the CPDM party accused the SDF of manipulating the *Takumbeng*. On this issue, the Post newspapers intimated that the SDF was defending the rights of the suffering masses. They as mothers who stand for such values could only pay back by supporting the noble course. [14]

O'Barr holds that their presence involves maternal authority to restore peace, threatening and using bodily exposure against violators from whom it is meant to shame and stop. Their hair was mostly grey and they circulated almost nude, teeth clenched with a large blade of grass gripped in between their mouth symbolizing "*no talk but action*". Goheen maintains that one of their hand properties which signaled their peaceful disposition was the use of the traditional plant called *nkeng* (*dracaena*) which is a symbol of peace. Use of the plant was symbolic and meant to register disapproval at certain "unholy" practices. [15]

As the informants put it, the group became very sensitive to acts of injustice and their natural sympathy as mothers especially with the killings of children they had painstakingly given birth to. To break the deadlock, the group had to re-adapt its role akin to the Pare women in Tanzania who were mobilized into a new form of political activity by the new circumstances in which they found themselves, not because of pre-existing structures. The practice of disrobing and shaming through exposing their nudity constituted their major tactic. As reported by Takougang and Krieger a week after Biya's "*sans objet*" speech in parliament, July 5, 1991, the *Takumbeng* openly challenged Cameroon's security forces in Bamenda, confronting mainly non-local, certainly uncomfortable troops blocking a protest march to the provincial governor's mansion. [16]

Awasom opines that their actions took the form of chanting, wailing and stripping themselves naked in order to scare off the forces of law and order drafted to quell the civil disobedience campaigns and ghost town operations that were strongly adhered to in the province. Their passage in the morning meant every place had to remain closed and everybody had to desert the streets. It is held that being mostly rural and illiterate farmers from adjourning villages, the women could be easily manipulated by the opposition chieftain. [17] However, the informants denied these allegations. To them, being

the metonymic of society, they could not in any way tolerate acts and behaviour that trampled on inalienable human rights.

Their approach was peaceful since they did not want the crisis to escalate bearing in mind that the fallouts of their struggle would benefit the younger and future generations. As O'Barr and Firmin-Sellers's note, when women's interests both economic and political are threatened, they become more militant in protection of such interests which touch on livelihoods, productive and reproductive roles. [18]

The *Takumbeng*'s symbolic representations were not understood by a considerable number of the predominantly Francophone soldiers. Some of the soldiers we interviewed registered their shock and disbelief in desecrating cultural norms by watching the nakedness of those they considered their mothers. Most of the military men, especially, those from the grasslands who are familiar with the sacrosanct aspects of tradition were rendered helpless and found it difficult to execute directives from hierarchy. [19] A military officer who hails from the area and who opted to remain anonymous disclosed that on a Wednesday in November 1991 when the forces had to repel demonstrators that were agitating for the release of indicted opposition leaders, he came in close contact with one of the prominent members of the *Takumbeng*. The woman who happened to know him, asked him to turn his face as they were about exposing their nudity. Reason being that in the circumstance, sanctions hit hard on those who are conversant with the abominable act and do so intentionally. The interviewee confessed that later on, he had to go for ritualistic cleansing. [20]

According to Cameroon Post, in the course of the confrontations some overzealous soldiers who were insistent on confronting some of the *Takumbeng* members died under mysterious circumstances. It is even alleged that the Governor of the Province, the Legion Commander of the National Gendarmerie and the Provincial Chief of National Security lost their wives in turns some months later due to their spearheading acts of torture against the women. The deaths were attributed to the chanting spells and incantations of ill luck and spell of doom from the *Takumbeng*. [21] Cameroon Post again reports on the activities of the *Takumbeng* with the caption "Women move naked to reinforce dead country

¹⁴ Idem

¹⁵ O'Barr, J. & Firmin-Sellers, K. 1995 "African Women in Politics", in M. Hay & S. Stichter (eds.), *African Women South of the Sahara* (London: Longman): 189-194.

¹⁶ O'Barr, J. & Firmin-Sellers, K. 1995 "African Women in Politics",

¹⁷ Awasom, S. 2002 *A Critical Survey of the Resuscitation, Activation, and Adaptation of Traditional African*

Female Political Institutions to the Exigencies of Modern Politics in the 1990s: The case of the Takumbeng Female Society in Cameroon, Paper presented at the 10th General Assembly of Codesria, Kampala, Uganda, 8th-12th December, 2002.

¹⁸ O'Barr, J. & Firmin-Sellers, K. 1995 "African Women in Politics",

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Cameroon Post 1991 No. 76, July 8-11.

in Bamenda". As reported the women moved in groups at busy streets and strategic junctions dressed up without underpants ready to expose their nakedness to anyone suspected of violating the ghost town injunction imposed by opposition parties throughout the country. The women were exercising some traditional rituals, which require that they move about with symbolic leaves hooked on their mouths to enforce total compliance of the civil disobedience campaign. [22]

Asked why they used their nudity as a strategy to frightened off security forces and others, Khan Elizabeth indicated that;

They considered themselves "kings of the Earth" and "architects of life" by virtue of their procreative capacity. Anybody who does not respect that natural fact will invite ill luck at his/her doorstep. She further affirmed "it is natural, we are life, he/she who does not show respect to the spring of life calls for darkness" and with God's support, darkness will be made manifest. In this context, darkness refers to curses and misfortunes that might befall any defaulter. [23]

Yenshu holds that their most potent weapons were their old age symbol of wisdom and the ritual of uncovering their nakedness to anybody who sought to resist their injunctions and actions. On such occasions, their costumes were somber, their countenance and demeanor reflected a state of melancholia. This scenario common with the other women's movements show women voicing their opposition to actions and policies that undermine their productive and reproductive rights, especially access to and land and food production, vital for family sustenance. [24]

On the same day at the slaughterhouse of the Bamenda Main Market, the women also invaded the slabs and scared off butchers and clients who attempted to defy the "operation dead country". Motorists who dared to drive through the Santa-Mbouda Road (outskirts of Bamenda town leading to the West Province) were also forced to make an about turn. In a day, the group could make several stops to ensure that the ghost town operations were enforced. This to them constituted the only veritable weapon to force the government to the negotiating table. [25]

Also, the crescendo of their actions was the barricade of the compound of the chairman of the SDF

party during the state of emergency declared in Bamenda from October 27-

December 28, 1992 following post elections violence. To forestall any attempts at rigging the elections, the opposition leader had earlier on convened a press conference designating himself president-elect based on the election tally sheets of his party. He was placed under house arrest and a dusk-to-dawn curfew enforced on Bamenda. A communiqué from the government indicated that they could no longer contain the state of generalized insecurity and grave peril that ensued following the 1992 presidential election results that proclaimed the CPDM candidate-President Biya winner. [26]

Goheen reports that the women set up a 24-hour guard, rotating every 12 hours at Mr. Ndi's residence. The *Takumbeng* blocked the entrance to the house of the opposition leader to prevent his extradition to Yaoundé. As recounted by the informants, they frequently performed certain rituals and demarcated a line to separate themselves and the advancing security forces. They entreated the intervention of the ancestors of the land and relied on God's protection since they considered their course a just one. As affirmed by the informants, their actions were guided by the philosophy that the virtuous will always triumph. Cameroon Post reported that thousands of persons defied the state of emergency in Bamenda to show solidarity to Mr. Ndi and others under house arrest. [27]

During the protest march, the elderly women occupying a vanguard position stripped naked. They were carrying tree leaves in their mouths and crying softly "*we have decided to follow Fru Ndi. No turning back, No turning back*". Interrogated as to the reason for occupying the frontlines, the informants intimated that it was a unanimous resolve to ginger others, signal to the opposition leader that "*it was a cross they were ready to carry to a logical end*". If they passed away in the exercise, the opposition chieftain and his followers should under no circumstance relent or betray the gracious course. It was a sacrifice as they put it for nothing good comes cheap. [28]

The transformation of the *Takumbeng* from an indigenous female secret society to a modern protest group is visible in a context of political intransigence and economic deprivation. The generalized state of turmoil warranted the intervention of postmenopausal women

²² Cameroon Post

²³ Interview with Khan Elizabeth, 64, member of Takumbeng, Mendakwe, 12th April 2024.

²⁴ Yenshu, E. 1995 Indigenous Society and Multiparty Politics in Cameroon in the Early 1990s, Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Pan African Anthropological Association (PAAA), Nairobi, Kenya, 15-19 October.

²⁵ Yenshu, E. 1995 Indigenous Society and Multiparty Politics

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Goheen, M. *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the crops* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 56.

²⁸ Goheen, M. *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the crops*

who got to center stage of the charged political atmosphere. The consensus drawn from the interviews and focus group discussions was: As mothers, they had gone through the pains of childbearing and understood how laborious and excruciating it was to accept the state of affairs without serious questions. As they put it, *'children belonged to all mothers and are fruits of the same womb'* without any distinction, so any attacks on them invited their wrath as it was an attack on humanity. They could only fraternally fight back like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa. [29]

This vividly agree to the frustration aggression theory which holds that once an individual has needs that cannot be satisfied, he becomes aggressive. Thus, when a basic desire is thwarted, the individual is frustrated and directs his aggression towards perceived authorities standing on the way of his achieving or attaining his desire. The Cameroon scenario reflected such frustration since the 1990s as politics in Cameroon was riddled 'with promises made and unfulfilled' as well as complex violence. First was in 1990 after decades of dictatorship and misrule, then the 1992 presidential elections which was to be free, fair and credible but was annulled and marred by fraud. This triggered frustration and violent political agitations in the North West Region and other parts of Cameroon. [30]

Political assassination

This was another form of violence coming from the ruling party, CPDM as a respond to SDF disorder in the Northwest region of Cameroon. Political killings or assassination and related violence have found expression in public discourses and have shaped the political-legal landscape in Cameroon since the re-introduction of multi-party democracy in 1990. The post1990 constitution states that Cameroon has become recognizes the universality of human rights; especially the right to life and security of the person. While these progressive laws further distinguish Cameroon as a state with outstanding legal commitments towards the universality of human rights, they have failed to find expression in the implementation process. [31]

This form of violence was prominence from 1990s with the introduction of multiparty politics. In a general note, political assassination refers to the targeted murder of prominent public and political figures for political reasons, aiming to cause political change, destabilize a regime, advance an ideology or seize power. These killings are premediated acts often carried out by individuals or groups seeking to influence government, society or policy. Larry Diamond argues that political

assassination constitutes a specific form of violence intended to take someone else's life against the person's wish meanly for political reasons. [32] Taking the case of the North West Region, Cameroon Tribwie argues that political killings or assassination was the order of the day in the 1990s due to the attempt to liberalize the political sphere of Cameroon. This was the case of Tita Fomukong in 1992 who was killed due to his link with the government in power. Tita Fomukong was the inhabitant of Bal, a Bamenda based politician and leader of the Cameroon National Party. [38]

In addition, it argues that he was killed by the angry mob in October 1992 amidst wide spread political violence ad rioting following contested presidential election results. The population who believed that the SDF was the elect sympathized with the party and started carrying out the act of vandalism. Reports indicates that Tita who had openly supported the CPDM became a prey into the hands of the angry mob. The angry mob surrounded and set fire to his home and he was burned to death inside. [33] Another outstanding figure assassinated was John Kohtem on August 20,2004. He was the Balikumbat District Chairman of the opposition social Democratic Front. His murder was blamed on the Fon Doh Gah Gwanyin III a local traditional ruler (fon), a member of parliament (MP) and the mayor belonging to the ruling CPDM party. Informants revealed that his killing stemmed from a heated verbal exchange during the meeting regarding the 2004 elections, registration process, during which Kohtem challenged Fon Doh. In the evening around the Bali Kumbat market square, he was reported and killed to death. This assignation provoked significant public outrage and massive street demonstrations in Bamenda by SDF supporters demanding justice. [34]

As a result, Fon Doh parliamentary immunity was uplifted and with several others, he was arrested and tried by the Ngoketunjia high court in 2006 and they were to serve 15 years each. Though Fon Doh appeal the ruling and was later release on bail on health ground, a decision which generate controversies and was seen by others as politically motivated. Still as result of the outcome, the private secretary of hon. Yoyo Emmanuel was arrested in Yaounde for allegedly leaking the report of the Attorney General of the North West to the minister of justice on the murder of late Balikumbat SDF district chairman. [35]

Although the Kohtem killings fell to be determined by the ordinary courts, innovative measures were introduced to alter the structural compositions of

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Larry Diamond (ed.). The Democratic Revolution. Struggles for Freedom and Pluralism in the Developing World. Introduction. Civil Society and the Struggle for Democracy. Freedom House. New York. 1992. P.1.

³² Larry Diamond (ed.). The Democratic Revolution ³⁸ Cameroon Tribwie No. 2026 (December 5, 1994) p. I.

³³ Cameroon Tribwie

³⁴ Cameroon Post No. 47(March 4, 2007) p. I.

³⁵ Cameroon Post

the courts. Judges were coopted from other jurisdictions apparently with approval from the Minister of Justice. The specially constituted courts lost the competence to determine the cases. The convictions recorded in these cases were later overturned on appeal on the common ground that the trial courts were irregularly constituted, resulting to a 0% conviction rate. The Esume and Kohtem cases were isolated cases of suspected political assassinations that fell to be determined by the ordinary courts under the simple rubric of murder. There were no wide spread action and no recusal petitions against the regular courts. The special mechanisms were legally unjustified, but given the status of the suspects as key politicians, it is argued that these measures were politically motivated with a view to adversely affect the justice outcomes in these cases. [36]

Another crucial indicator of political assassination was Che Ngwa Ghandi and six others in 1992. He was an internal auditor for a government development agency, and was brutally killed after his arrest from his office on the 9th November 1992 and taken to the Brigade Mixte Mobile (BMM) headquarters in Bamenda, where he was suspended from an iron bar and severely beaten. He died four days later at the military hospital in Bamenda on November 18, 1992. The incident highlighted the human rights abuses that occurred in Bamenda during this period. Amnesty International reported that Che Ngwa's death was a result of torture while in police custody, and others detained with him. He was arrested simply because he was accused of involving in violence following the results of the presidential elections in Cameroon. [37]

State Repression

Another form of state respond to SDF popularity was repression. Between the periods 1990 to 2000, there were diverse forms of political killings and related crimes in Cameroon, ranging from state sponsored actions to local political conflicts and rivalries. In May 1990, 6 people were killed and hundreds more injured in Bamenda, following efforts by the state to suppress a political rally the newly founded SDF Party. In 1992, at least 100 families were displaced and property worth millions of CFA looted and destroyed during political efforts to check electoral fraud.

Cameroon post holds that even after the numerous undemocratic acts, the incumbent president decided after the 1992 presidential election to put his main adversary Ni John Fru Ndi under house arrest and move troops to surround his house. Eteki Mboumoua insited that the violence in Bamenda was triggered by the government which continue its logic of '*blind and out proportion repression*,' the decreeing of martial law in a

particular region, the arresting and torturing of citizens from during this period was an embarrassment to the whole nation as far as democracy was concerned.[38] The government as well arrested and detained several journalists including Pius Njawe, the editor in chief of le Messenger, who was for covering the SDF rally. Cameroon post holds that one week into the state of emergency in the 1992, several persons were hospitalized with their lives hanging on thread. One of the victims Ngwa Joseph reported to the post that he was arrested on November 8th, 1992 at his resident in Tarikon where he lived with his parents. The forces came pounding at the door but Ngwa stayed put and the door was smashed opened and the forces pulled him out his bed and start torturing and beating him. [39]

He was taken to a waiting military truck where others were already bundled. The beatings continue to the military camp at up Station. On November 9, 1992 some of the inmates were transferred to the BMM. While there, Ngwa and others had their hands tied with strings to their ankles. [40] An iron bar was passed between their limbs and suspended to the air and he was tortured asking to admit that he participated in the assassination of Alhaji Tita Fomunkong. The torture intensified, after they discovered that he was losing life, he was carried to the general hospital and handcuffed to the bed. He was later transferred to the provincial hospital and here, he was abandoned. Another form of repression was the arrest of hon. P.P Nwenti in Ndop and charged for Arson.

He was a history teacher at Government High School Ndop, former parliamentarian and ordinary member of the executive body of the SDF. [41] He was picked up and detained for five days at the military concentration camp in Ndop Divisional Office. Based on his explanation extracted from the Camerron post, he was caused of being the brain behind the burning of houses in the division following the post presidential violence of October 11, 1992. Meanwhile about 20 persons of SDF party were as well arrested in Ndop. While in Batibo, teachers were arrested and persecuted for their liberal thoughts. This includes the history teacher Teno Lawrence, a history teacher, prince Hansel Mbah a headmaster, Bama Joe, a biology teacher and cheng Edward, a language teacher. [42]

In a similar count, Mary Biena Kimbi, a local SDF member, was arrested by gendarmes on the evening of 6 June 1997 and taken to the Gendarmerie Brigade headquarters in Ndu. She was reportedly stripped, beaten and sexually tortured following her arrest, then held for four days without food or water. On about 12 June she was transferred to the Gendarmerie Brigade headquarters in the nearby town of Nkambe, where she remained in

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Cameroon Life vol. 2 No 2 (January, 1992) p.12

³⁸ Cameroon post, no. 138, December 9, 1992

³⁹ Cameroon post,

⁴⁰ Cameroon Tribune No. 2026 (December 5, 1992) p.l.

⁴¹ Cameroon Tribune

⁴² Ibid

incommunicado detention, denied all contact with family or lawyer. [43] On 19 June she was taken to the Gendarmerie Company headquarters in Nkambe, where she and another woman detainee were reportedly whipped with belts, after which she was unable to walk. On 20 June a delegation from the National Commission of Human Rights and Freedoms, a human right monitoring body established by the government in February 1992, was repeatedly refused permission to see her by the Brigade Commander. She was at that time said by the authorities to be held without charge under an administrative detention order on the authority of the Senior Divisional Officer of Donga Mantung Division, North-West Province. [44]

It appears that the authorities have been using administrative detention orders in an abusive fashion to provide a semblance of legality for the imprisonment of government critics or opponents. In May 1992 at least 16 SDF activists were detained in Nkambe on accusations of illegally banning the holding of a market, obstructing tax collection, holding illegal political rallies and inciting the population to violence. The Law relating to the Maintenance of Law and Order, No. 90/54 of 19 December 1990, gives the authorities unlimited powers of administrative detention, without any legal safeguards, of people suspected of "banditry". [45] Such detainees may be held indefinitely for renewable 15-day periods and have no legal recourse against arbitrary or unjust detention. None of the accusations against the SDF detainees appear to be related to banditry, and it therefore appears that these broad powers of detention, granted on a permanent basis to unspecified government officials, have been misused to detain political opponents of the government. Amnesty International has previously expressed concern at the renewal in December 1990 - under the guise of reforms of security laws - of virtually unlimited powers of administrative detention. [46]

Le Messenger further holds that gendarmes were sent into Ndu to "punish" its occupants for supporting the SDF. SDF members have previously been harassed, detained and killed by the security forces. In October 1991, following weeks of peaceful demonstrations in Bamenda, North-West Province, at least two people were shot dead when a political rally scheduled to take place was banned by the authorities and the security forces opened fire with live ammunition and grenades on demonstrators who were trying to disperse. At least 50 people were reported to have been severely injured, some 10 losing hands or limbs. No inquiry is known to have been held into these killings, nor did it appear that any measures were taken by the authorities to prevent or limit the number of deaths caused by the security forces. [47]

The Time news line argues that when multi-party elections were organized, repeated violations of the right to freedom of expression undermined the process of democratic transition undertaken since the early 1990s during the efforts to ensure democracy. The state broadcasting corporation, *l'Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Camerounaise* (CRTV), which was under tight government control, failed to provide fair and even-handed coverage of opposition political parties. This problem was exacerbated by the absence of a procedure through which individuals could apply for private broadcasting licenses. [48] The introduction in 1997 of community radio stations in Cameroon, while in itself a positive development, was unlikely to significantly reduce this information deficit. Meanwhile, the harassment and imprisonment of journalists in the print media for criticizing government authorities had a chilling effect on the press especially in the Northwest part of Cameroon. This state repression ostensibly undermined the efforts at building effective democracy in the Northwest and Cameroon in general. [55]

Mass protest as a form of violence

The 1990s and 2000s Cameroon was characterized by mass protest demanding for democratic restoration and transparency in the electoral processes in the Northwest region and Cameroon at large. Mass protest according to Samuel Brannen is therefore a large-scale public demonstration, focusing on their drivers such as inequality, injustice, economic hardship, political alienation with the intension to create crisis in view to force negotiations and reveal hidden dissatisfaction. [49] As the time puts it, is a mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions, characterized by showmanship or display of an unconventional nature, and undertaken to obtain rewards from political or economic systems while working within the system. Equally, mass protest act includes the following elements: the action expresses a grievance, a conviction of wrong or injustice; the protesters are unable to correct the condition directly by their own efforts; the action is intended to draw attention to the grievances; the action is further meant to provoke ameliorative steps by some target group; and the protestors depend upon some combination of sympathy and fear to move the target group in their behalf". Instead, it must take reasonable steps to enable people protest and to protect participants in peaceful demonstrations from disruption by others. Contrarily in

⁴³ The Messenger Vol. 2 No. 2 (February 8. 1992) pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ The Messenger

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ The Messenger No. 27 (November 25. 1992) p. 1.

⁴⁷ The Messenger

⁴⁸ The Times No. 2 (August 30, 1997) p. 2 ⁵⁵ The time

⁴⁹ Samuel Brannen, "The Age of Mass protest," *Center for Statistics and International Studies* 2, no.5 (2003): 12-26.

Cameroon, the government thinks that protest marches will affect the integrity of the state. [50]

In the Northwest Region of Cameroon, mass protest in its visible impact began during the reintroduction of democracy in the region in 1990. As earlier mentioned, the fight to reinstate democracy was not initially welcome by the ruling government and with this, all attempts were made to forestall it. [51] The government saw democracy as threat to the unity of the Country since it was coming along with multiple political parties. It should be noted initially Ahidjo had made every effort to ensure a single political party in the Country. A project that was realized in 1966 with the merging of all political parties to form the Cameroon National Union. This was to ensure National Unity and integration. With this, it was so difficult to destroy the foundation and the project of Unity built by Ahidjo. This is the reason why the idea of multiparty democracy was seen by the government as a far fetch and was not ready to accept it. With the constant resistance by the government, mass protest was inevitable. [59]

Pro-democracy demonstration in Bamenda from mid-April was followed by "Operation Ghost Towns" (villes mortes general strikes) in May. These protests brought what many observers consider to be the most serious civil disturbances in Cameroon since independence. In late April President Biya granted an amnesty to political exiles and political prisoners, including those convicted of the 1984 "coup attempt". In December 1991, the National Assembly passed a new electoral code which would enable multi-party legislative elections to be held in the country. [52] In Ndu, mass protest erupted due to the government attempt in 1992 to force the masses who were still trying to relieve themselves from the effect of 1991 civil uprising. On 6 June gendarmes were sent to Ndu to recover unpaid taxes.

Taxes have not been paid in some areas since a civil disobedience campaign in 1991 by opposition parties tried to force the government to convene a national conference on the country's political future. During that campaign, tax collectors were reportedly chased away from Ndu by local people. However, under the pretext of collecting taxes in June 1992, gendarmes reportedly used extortion and violence against the people in some areas known for their support of opposition parties. [53] In this regard, at least four civilians were shot dead by gendarmes in Ndu, in Cameroon's North-West Province, in early June 1992. There were also reports of detainees being tortured there. Amnesty

International is concerned that the security forces seem to have used indiscriminate and excessive lethal force in their attempts to control civil unrest and that they subjected detainees to torture or to other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The organization called on the government of Cameroon to institute an independent judicial inquiry into the incidents at Ndu with a view to bringing to justice those responsible for any human rights violations. Gendarmes and police sealed off the market area on 6 June, arresting about 50 people who could not provide tax receipts proving that they had already paid their taxes, and firing warning shots to disperse the angry crowd that gathered. [54]

Most of those arrested were subsequently released by the crowd or escaped from custody during the day. In the evening, when the gendarmes tried to leave Ndu with six remaining prisoners, they were attacked with stones and reportedly fired indiscriminately into the crowd, killing three people and wounding several more. Those killed were Anthony Tangiri, a court messenger, Joseph Yongla, a trader, and Glory Ngeh, a tradeswoman who died three days later from gunshot wounds. On the night of 6 June, local people burned the homes of three gendarmes in Ndu, and a policewoman married to a gendarme was reportedly stripped and beaten by a crowd. In reprisal, gendarmes' broke windows of homes, stores and vehicles that night, and reportedly attacked the occupants of cars arriving in Ndu, killing one man, Hilary Bantar Njeta. [55]

Elections Violence

The second multi-party elections represent a crucial stage for countries in the process of democratic transition. Cameroon's first multi-party elections were marred by the lack of opposition participation in March 1992. Later in the year the presidential elections were highly criticized by opposition political parties and international observers. This proved a precursor of things to come. Violence or the threat of violence also hindered the full participation of voters and political parties in the electoral process. [56] In some cases, opposition representatives were prevented from casting their votes or posting monitors at the polling sites, as is stipulated in the electoral law. Observers from the "Francophonie" group cited cases of violence against voters and "the presence in some voting sites of a supposed 'vigilance committee' whose role remains to be clarified." IFES also reported "the presence of self-identified 'private' security personnel outside some polling stations; when questioned, these personnel would not supply further information. [57]

⁵⁰ The Times No. 3 (February 30, 1996) p. 6.

⁵¹ Dieudonne Oyono. *Un Parcours vital: Essai sur le Renouveau Camerounais* (Paris: Edi Action. 1990), 61.

⁵⁹ Dieudonne Oyono. *Un Parcours vital*

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Cameroon Post, volume number 137, December, 1992.

⁵⁴ Cameroon Post

⁵⁵ Interview with Yong Emmanuel, 68, SDF Campaign Manager NWR, 11th March 2026.

⁵⁶ Le Messenger, January 23, 1992, summarized press coverage

⁵⁷ Le Messenger,

Le Messenger holds that several attacks on SDF activists were reported during the election period. Violence erupted after the poll in the South West Province, where international observers noted serious problems with intimidation on polling day, including by police posted in and around the polling sites. On 16 May the SDF parliamentary candidate for Balikumbat, in the constituency of Ngo-Ketunjia South, is reported to have had the fence of his compound set on fire. [58] Moreover, the International Foundation for Election Systems reported that SDF representatives in that area were not allowed access to the polling station. Monitors who attempt to observe elections without official accreditation risk mistreatment by the authorities. Two members of Human Rights Clinic and Education Center (HURCLED) who attempted to monitor the polls in Balikumbat, the constituency of Ngo-Ketunjia South, a pro-RDPC area in a province known to be overwhelmingly pro-SDF, were expelled from the area by police in the morning of 17 May. Another HURCLED observer who was posted at a polling booth located in a police compound in Bamenda, although allowed to monitor, was harassed by the police when two international election observers sought to speak with him. [59]

It appears that the authorities have been using administrative detention orders in an abusive fashion to provide a semblance of legality for the imprisonment of government critics or opponents. In May 1992 at least 16 SDF activists were detained in Nkambe on accusations of illegally banning the holding of a market, obstructing tax collection, holding illegal political rallies and inciting the population to violence. The Law relating to the Maintenance of Law and Order, No. 90/54 of 19 December 1990, gives the authorities unlimited powers of administrative detention, without any legal safeguards, of people suspected of "banditry". Such detainees may be held indefinitely for renewable 15-day periods and have no legal recourse against arbitrary or unjust detention. [60] None of the accusations against the SDF detainees appear to be related to banditry, and it therefore appears that these broad powers of detention, granted on a permanent basis to unspecified government officials, have been mis-used to detain political opponents of the government. Amnesty International has previously expressed concern at the renewal in December 1990 - under the guise of reforms of security laws - of virtually unlimited powers of administrative detention. [61]

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the various forms of pro-SDF and anti-SDF violence in the Northwest region of Cameroon following the birth of the party in 1990. The

findings revealed that the SDF believed in mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, pre and post electoral violence as means of political expression. The opponent and incumbent CPDM reacted by instituting state repression, political assassinations and frequent band on political rallies. This made the political atmosphere tense making it difficult for the SDF to benefit from its popularity in the North West by gaining in political votes.

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