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Call for papers

Cameroon: the stationary State

Guest editors:

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In 1986, *Politique africaine* dedicated a dossier to the “awakening of Cameroon” and analysed the consequences of the 1984 political crisis in the aftermath of a coup attempt against the then young President Paul Biya (Bayart, 1986). A decade later, in 1996, the same journal pondered on the effects of “democratisation” that had plunged Cameroon into a “no man’s land” (Sindjoun and Courade, 1996). The dossier threw light on the “scars” and broken lines in a country rife with tensions, and where part of the “unfinished business” in the colonial years (Mbembé, 1996), through the Anglophone question, was still interfering with the present.

Since then, the “demobilisation” of the political opposition movements of the 1990s (Pomerolle, 2008, Eboussi, 1997), or the “renewal without revival” of the political elite (Eboko, 1999) during a “transition that did not take place” (Mehler, 1997) has combined with endemic corruption (Abéga, 2007) to keep the country in a state of hibernation. While the signs of implosion often loom large and observers keep announcing Cameroon’s dislocation since the 1990s (see International Crisis Group, 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2015), Paul Biya's regime has survived through successive adaptive processes. Whether characterised as “under-developed” (Médard, 1977), “neo-patrimonial” (Médard, 1979), “authoritarian” (Mbembé, 2001), “post authoritarian” (Pomerolle, 2008), “wizardly” (Geschiere, 1995) or simply “absent” (Pigeaud, 2011), the regime has thwarted all prognoses for three decades. This resilience the regime has mustered by force and way of deception seems to confirm Bayart's Gramscian hypothesis on the continuity of the “hegemonic bloc” (Bayart, 1989), whose apparent vulnerability contrasts with a life expectancy President Biya described recently as: “power lasts not for those who want, but those who can”. This “*State from elsewhere*” deserves analysis also on its “periphery”, which relativizes the power in Yaounde’s command centre (Sindjoun, 2002), to propose approaches for unpacking “local” political complexities amid the generalized imbalance of the territory, the localized regional claims, and political control over “passive revolutions” (Bayart, 1989).

Although this central African nation was one of the most studied in Africanist social sciences between 1970 and 1990, its relative political stability, unending agony and the anomic nature of its social and economic life have impaired a revival of political, social and economic thinking in the last decade. With Cameroon espousing the profile of a country torn

linguistically between French and English, researchers have difficulty to dialogue¹. This dossier attempts to rise above the "francophone/anglophone" divide and associate the two trends in intellectual and scientific production around one and the same discussion.

This task becomes even more pressing because of two topical issues: the return of the Anglophone question to the national and international public arena in 2016, and the emergence of a terror front masterminded by Boko Haram in ways that have been destabilizing part of the country's northern regions since 2014. Alongside these two challenges, the presidential elections are due in 2018 and could be the last for the incumbent, should he decide to run. Paradoxically, a close look at the situation in Cameroon shows that the authorities at Etoudi have come out stronger, rather than weaker from these situations. They benefit, on one side, from the counter-terrorism mechanism which provides for regime of exception and strengthens social control, while, on the other, making it easier to govern a territory divided by "ethno-political exclusion" (Roessler, 2016; Bayart, Geschiere and Nyanmjoh, 2001). Consequently, the centre of power in Yaounde seems to have become more popular in public opinion in Eastern Cameroon, despite the claims made at the international level by part of the English-speaking political minority, for it has succeeded to position itself as the ultimate bulwark against the dual threat posed by Boko Haram's "terrorists" and opponents the president himself refers to as "sorcerer's apprentices" who want to divide Cameroon. This major line of argument feeds on conspiracy theory and plots, which have spread beyond any measure of common sense and make Cameroon look, rightly or wrongly, like a country that invents enemies for itself whenever it cannot rise above the bonded freedoms and endless social coma in the domestic landscape. What can we make of these moments of crisis and what do they tell us about the state of Cameroon? How can these breaches opening up in Cameroon's dormant landscape help us rethink the dynamics in this country?

This dossier offers some insights on how to read contemporary Cameroon through a range of different lenses in order to explain the apparent tension between a state we will refer to as "stationary" and transformations in the exercise of power that are taking place behind a façade of inaction. It is the way we use to look at how contemporary historical issues around security are coupled with local government mechanisms by evoking fear and "worry" (Bigo, 2005). The question then is, how are initiatives to refocus the debate on social issues and democracy being neutralized under the guise of the fight against terrorism or the crusade against corruption?

Two moments are quite important in what public commentators call "transformations in continuity" in the exercise of power in Cameroon. First, there is the "fight against corruption", initiated in 2004 as Cameroon was striving to reach completion point in eligibility for the "Highly Indebted Poor Country" (HIPC) initiative of the IMF and the World Bank. The Bretton Woods institutions could not have imagined they had offered an opportunity to the Yaounde regime. The crusade that the Biya regime unleashed thereafter

¹ For example, anglophone researchers have produced abundant literature on issues of identity and political representativeness, as well as on economic issues, which is hardly taken into account by local francophone researchers and vice versa. The bibliography on the anglophone crisis, published from anglophone researchers' perspective as compiled by Francis Nyanmjoh, is instructive in this regard. See link: <http://www.ascleiden.nl/news/reading-list-anglophone-crisis-and-internet-shutdown-cameroon>

led to the arrest of some of the top dignitaries of the ruling party, Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), including some of those in high office. From the Prime Minister to the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Health, the Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic and the General Manager of the National Airline, "Operation Sparrow Hawk" (*L'opération épervier*) cracked down on several top officials. Labelled with the name of a familiar bird of prey, this extensive operation itself became a method of conducting local governance through threats and blackmail about arrests. The initiative therefore enabled the system to intensify the control it had over all the social forces in the country. While the names of "arrestable" public figures made newspaper headlines (Awondo, 2012) alongside other events, corruption continued to be a fundamental problem across the society, and one that was recognized as such in the highest echelons of the State.

Moreover, Boko Haram's attacks, which the regime calls a "terrorist threat", have made it possible to revive the security machine and prohibit mass public organisation. The Penal Code adopted in 2016 seems, in this light, to be a political instrument for countering Boko Haram, and also for limiting demonstrations and other public gatherings. It has since become increasingly difficult or even dangerous to raise social questions without appearing to be a threat to public security or to be engaging in "terrorist" activity.

We nonetheless submit the hypothesis that underneath this *stationary state*, new dynamics are at work inside Cameroon. It is precisely by studying such dynamics that this dossier will attempt to elucidate how the momentum of change is now operating in this country where people openly claim that "one does not change the means by which change happened". What are the elements that can help us understand the mechanisms by which the head of state maintains control over the elite and continues to hang on to power? What are the linkages between economic obligations based on extraversion and the disaggregation of political staff at the national level? What is the ethos that underpins the maintenance of political order in an increasingly enfeebled social context? What ties exist between the "terrorist threat" and other dynamics pertaining to intergenerational debates and the role of the diaspora, for example, which raises strong mistrust? Our responses to these questions will focus on the following three areas:

1. "New crises" and rule of law in Cameroon

In the current context, the "Anglophone question" and the "terrorist threat" offer original and enlightening entry points into two dimensions of the situation in Cameroon. On one hand, there are activities to protect the rule of law; while, on the other, there are techniques and methods used, sometimes beyond or in spite of constitutional order, to counteract actors in a crisis with the potential to cause an implosion of the society. Concretely, one may assume that the adoption of a new penal code and a new code of criminal procedures in 2016, for example, was intended to respond to the former, while the redeployment of a legal and security arsenal, the *aggiornamento* of techniques and methods to tighten the grip of power over the whole of society, was dedicated to the latter.

The point here, therefore, is to look at the latest political and social events in Cameroon, not as a moment of abrupt change, but as the entry point to a *re-problematisation* process,

during which public power is put to the test on values for the rule of law and democratic principles. In exploring matters pertaining to the rule of law in Cameroon, the dossier attempts to underline just how far this issue has been transformed in its formulation depending on the critical moments and events happening internally (tensions around penal code reform, freedom of the press, etc.) or externally (Boko Haram attacks and raids along the borders of Cameroon).

There is need to once again explore the different pathways that have been used to shape and reinvent debate and discourse around democratic construction. The "new crises" would then be an *analyser* of power relations (Foucault, 2013) that makes it possible to reveal in a new light what seems to be buried in Cameroon's routine steps for "legitimate defence" (Linhardt and Moreau de Bellaing, 2005).

2. Shifting focus from political to social issues: the necessary heuristic reversal

What prevents us from raising current social issues in Cameroon in a serene manner? Why is reform in sectors as important as education and higher learning, housing or health so difficult to put out in the public space? How has the over-politicisation of public life in Cameroon affected the delivery of social policies in the post-adjustment era? Addressing issues on Cameroon from this perspective creates the premise for a heuristic reversal that is necessary for the renewal of knowledge on this nation. Over the past decades, intellectual discourse has, for the most part, been focused on political issues, especially with the heralding figure of President Biya or the system he embodies. By pursuing this major line of thought, analysts from all sides have played into the over-politicisation of social issues in Cameroon. Political issues (debates on identity and ethnic origin, governance, elections, rule of law and justice, etc.) have taken precedence over the issues of social life, and over economic and regional inequalities. Obviously, a tenuous link exists between the two areas, but the over-politicisation of economic issues should happen in parallel with the macro-economic transformations facing the country in the global economy, against the backdrop of supervision from international financial institutions.

Fundamental research has to be conducted on the weight of harmful political and State practices inconsistent with local and diaspora forces driving the dynamics for social transformation. Tensions are perceptible, for example, in the field of private and public sector coalitions. Private entrepreneurs have to deal with elites in the party-state who try to benefit from investments in all sectors of the economy, despite the harmful consequences for the country's development. Such findings have been confirmed in almost all areas of social and economic life, and particularly in investments for reform in the water sector and urban management (Nantchop, 2015). These situations in part explain the collisions between the informal and formal markets, and contribute to the emergence of state networks in constant redeployment (Hibou, 1998).

The logic behind this vicious circle comes from a spectrum broader than corruption. The prevarication and monetarization of social relations, even within public departments, has skyrocketed to such levels that it is possible to renew the hypothesis of "the neo-patrimonial state" (Médard, 1992, 1981), to confirm that in Cameroon today, two times more than

yesterday, the “politics of the belly” (Bayart, 1989) is at play, and to open a thorough debate on “one of the most opaque, most centralized and most prosaic systems of government in postcolonial Africa”.² There is reason to think this situation derives, at the same time, from the “attitude of avoidance” and the regulation of elites, who see their allegiance to the regime as a way of protecting themselves from the dangers of *Opération Épervier* and/or a hypothetical change in political power. Taking a renewed outlook on issues such as education, access to housing and health, can enlighten us on the situation in Cameroon amid the paradoxes, continuities and conservative orthodoxy from a leader who controls the elites in the way Putin does in Russia, and masterminds his regime’s longevity like Machiavelli’s *The Prince*.

One indicator attests to Cameroon’s downward spiral into social uncertainty. Cameroon is one of the 14 countries worldwide where indicators on maternal mortality have recorded no significant progress since 1990. In other words, Cameroon has reached the symbolic threshold of 1000 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births. This health indicator is the same in countries that have experienced long-term crises (Sierra Leone, DRC, Chad) and positions Cameroon below countries with less human and material resources (Mali, Benin, for example).

3. Reforming under a “reign nearing its end”: the governance of neutralization

Cameroon, like most African countries, is conducting reforms in the post-adjustment era under the auspices of the international financial institutions (the IMF and the World Bank). This co-construction of public action is carried out with a stream of partners, including bilateral, private, non-governmental and civil society partners in what is now known as the “matrix of public action in Africa” (Eboko, 2015). Beyond the propaganda about “milestone achievements”, these reforms show there is a paradoxical balance in Cameroon’s political landscape that we call the governance of neutralization. This is a zero-sum game that consists in neutralizing any effort for the emergence of a figure embodying the idea of “succession” in the president’s majority party. This governance assumes that political figures have access to public resources by staging and prioritizing their allegiance to the regime beyond the mandates, missions and responsibilities they have. Indeed, conducting reform exposes the officials to a two-pronged constraint, where only failure may not have any political consequence. Conducting a successful reform that entails management of a financial portfolio places the authorities responsible for it in the potential posture of successful figures, which is dangerous politically.

In this context, it would be useful to document how the authorities politically construct and manage public policies or reforms, successes and failures whose consequences enshrine an unprecedented form of political logic. In fact, none of the major disasters that mark the decay of certain sectors has given rise to exemplary sanctions from the top officials in government or the Department of justice. Instead, the opposite is recurrent. A Finance Minister was sacked after he held successful negotiations with the IMF in 1997 and “dared”

² Achille Mbembé, « Au Cameroun, le crépuscule d’une dictature à huis clos », *Le Monde Afrique*, 9 October 2017: Further reading at http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/10/09/au-cameroun-le-crepuscule-d-une-dictature-a-huis-clos_5198501_3212.html#HXw803hR2kVK6WT3.99

to organise a press conference to report these negotiations to the general public. A Health Minister was sacked and jailed after he and international partners implemented an initiative in 2007 on free AIDS drugs. The conjunction of political choices for controlling the movement of elites and the common law offences "authorized" by the vacuity of what economists refer to as "quality of spending", is one of the hallmarks of the system. Examples of the sort abound. Rare are those in the other direction, where scandals of all kinds in the health, transport, education, and prisons systems, to name a few, end in silence within the polity after the announcement of "investigations" whose results are published either late or amidst general indifference³.

Two types of facts may shed light on this phenomenon. The authorities' prudence reinforces the stationary dimension of a state that gets paralysed, in part, by constant announcements about its soon ending reign. Further, the reconfiguration of the political fray, both on the side of the so-called opposition parties and that of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), is an important factor in the current situation. The imminence of presidential elections in 2018 has given rise, since 2015, to discreet, yet real confrontation between rival forces within the party-state. Since the end of 2015, an increasing number of regionalized "motions and counter-motions from the people", often driven by party elites in favour of "the natural candidate Paul Biya", are creating tensions among the party bigwigs. These real contests on who will be the most authorised voice to sign or get others to sign the "motion", or even the best statement in support of the presidential candidate, uncover a landscape with the recomposition of fractions that will undoubtedly be central to the transition. On the side of the opposition, Ni John Fru Ndi's Social Democratic Front has split into several factions and this latter, hit by the "founding father" syndrome (Ela, 1990; Mbembé, 2001) has probably and definitely lost all credibility beyond his regional stronghold. Figures who are partly old and partly new have entered the presidential campaign race. Maurice Kamto, an academician and former minister of the current regime, is one of them. Likewise, but more recently, the former president of the Cameroon Bar Association and former vice-president of Amnesty International, Barrister Akere Muna, an anglophone and the son of the former vice-president of Cameroon (Solomon Tandeng Muna) followed suit. These younger dignitaries and candidates are trying to rebuild a broken opposition force. What ideas are emanating from this repositioning in the build-up to the announced end and constantly renewed reign of the "Biya era"?

The priority, but not exhaustive areas where contributions would be required concern the political manoeuvres within projects and reforms that concern port infrastructure (the construction and commissioning of the Kribi deep-water port to support the Douala autonomous port), prison policy and justice, the education system, the health system, etc.

³ 21 October 2016, a train accident causes over a hundred casualties at Eseka (between Yaounde and Douala) wounding hundreds; 12 March, 2017: a 31-year-old woman, pregnant with twins, is disembowelled by her sister in law who was trying to save the children in the dead mother's womb. The event took place at the entrance to the maternity section of Laquintinie hospital in Douala; 5 May, 2007: Kenyan Airways flight 507 disappears from the radar of the airport authorities a few minutes after take-off from Douala international airport. The wreckage is found only 3 days later; 114 casualties. Kenyan authorities get to the scene of the tragedy before Cameroonian officials. Cameroon's Transport Minister at the time argues, in shameless self-defence, that he was in his village to prepare for elections on behalf of the ruling party.

With this in mind, there is need also to highlight France's role as an adjustment variable among partners for the reforms Cameroon is conducting. While Cameroonian academicians, journalists and citizens were cultivating a hard-line narrative vis-à-vis France, Cameroon was offering French companies a particularly privileged position in the management of major reforms. This mechanism of tutelage seems however to be falling apart with the advent of new partnerships. What are the mechanisms and facts that explain this paradox, if it is real at all? The transformation of the debt burden Yaounde owes to Paris has given rise to the "Debt Reduction-Development Contract" (C2D) which finances several sectors. What are the leverage points by which French diplomacy is being reconfigured in Cameroon's international relations which have been on an extensively diversifying trend?

Proposals for articles (1 page) should be sent to the dossier coordinators (fred.eboko@wanadoo.fr and pawondo2005@yahoo.fr) by **30 November 2017**.

Timeline:

- 30 November 2017: send proposals to the coordinators
- 15 December 2017: authors of selected proposals are notified
- 1st March 2018: send selected articles to the journal's editorial board (50 000 characters, spaces and footnotes included)
- June 2018: publication.

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