An African Experiment in Nation Building: The Bilingual Cameroon Republic Since Reunification

edited by Ndiva Kofele-Kale

Westview Special Studies on Africa

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The Federal Republic of Cameroon was created October 1, 1961, when the former British Trusteeship Territory of the Southern Cameroons and the newly independent Republic of Cameroun (formerly the French Trusteeship Territory of Cameroun) joined together in a highly creative venture in nation building. This volume attempts a critical evaluation of the Cameroon experiment, underscoring both its achievements and failures.

The first chapters, devoted to the search for a Cameroonian identity, chronicle the rise and evolution of Cameroon nationalism. Parts 2 and 3 examine the nation's major political and economic institutions, focusing on the distribution of political power and tracing efforts at shaping an equitable economic order through integration of the federated states' economies and reduction of economic disparities among the various regions. The final section, on various aspects of social development, reflects a concern for bridging gaps between French- and English-speaking, as well as between rural and urban Cameroonians.

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For Yoti, Meano, Ewenye, and
to the memory of my parents

Foreword

Willard R. Johnson

THE POLITICAL ACHIEVEMENT

Cameroon is often called "the African continent in microcosm." It is one of the most diverse and most beautiful countries in a continent whose social intricacies and geographical variations attain a scale matched only by the industrial world's capacity to stereotype them. There are more language/cultural groups among Africans than any other collection of people of comparable size, yet, to the Western World, "they all look alike." In this vast region of every geographic and geological machination the Mind of God has wrought, the Western eye sees only "jungle." Among the political traditions of these humanity-oriented peoples, who created and have maintained the oldest experience in statecraft, the leaders of the modern imperialist states concern themselves only with the "fragile new states" that their own interventions provoked into being. But, that is today's Africa in context. And in that context, almost all the many questions outsiders may pose about the continent may be answered, in some way, based on the experience of Cameroonians.

Of course, the questions always reflect one's own preoccupations as much as the object of concern. Western intellectuals and policy-makers are just beginning to appreciate Africa for itself, and not simply as an open stage on which someone else's dramas are played out. For too many of them the good African state is the one that is quiet and friendly. Cameroon has been that. Old orders have not crumbled too rapidly, and there are few new accents to be heard there. But, this was not always so, and it is remarkable that the fears that dominated Western officials at the time of Cameroon's independence have died so quickly.

Cameroon is, with Somalia, Africa's only experience in reconciling the impact of two colonial legacies (actually, for Cameroon, and only potentially for Somalia, it is three). With Kenya, Cameroon was the first colony in "Black Africa" to experience armed rebellion against colonial rule. It created one of Africa's few attempts at federalism. It is one of a handful of states where the identity and authority of the Head of State has not been in doubt for a single day since independence. Next to Sekou Toure, President Ahidjo is Africa's longest ruling political leader. The country has one of Africa's best records of economic growth.

And yet, one of the important questions to pose about this, as any experiment is, "Is it successful?" Proper refinements to this question would include, "successful at what?" and "successful for whom?"

A decade ago I ended my own study of The Cameroon Federation with the following observation: "Cameroon has been remarkably successful in consolidating the state. By doing so it has given itself an even chance for some day becoming the 'One Cameroon Nation'." This present book ably takes up that next issue and argues that the country has made, and had made great strides in achieving a sense of common Cameroonian nationality among its diverse peoples. Both the pre-independence and the more recent experience in consolidating that sense of common history and common destiny is amplified here beyond what has already been published elsewhere. However, one can still ask the important question whether the political success of the state is also the political success of its people? The Cameroonian political order has revealed a high level of centralization and concentrated authority. Indeed, unique among African states, on the day of independence there was only one functioning authoritative institution, the Presidency itself. Since that time the trappings of federalism have been sloughed off, and so also the trappings of competitive political parties. Governmental affairs are mostly technical; the realm of politics is small.

Another open question is whether the Cameroon experience contains useful lessons for the partisans of African unity more generally, and for fragmentary societies elsewhere. President Ahidjo clearly opted to emphasize the structural dimensions of integration over the ideological ones. A firmly established and essentially coercive order preceded the growth of social, cultural and economic interchanges among the Cameroonian peoples. It is not clear that reliance on such functional transactions would have, or could have led gradually to the political and structural unity that the Cameroon state represents today. Perhaps it is the same for regional or continental unities. But the conditions which allowed Cameroon to put these structures of unity into place may be unique, or nearly so, involving as they did such a large role for the United Nations. Perhaps there is little guidance in this experience for efforts such as the Customs Union of Central African States or the Economic Community of West African States. We have already seen the East African Community fall apart; it did have some common institutions to manage functional interaction, but lacked the supranational political authority that the Cameroon experience would suggest may be necessary. On the other hand, this experience may hold a rationale for optimism regarding the viability of the "bi-communal" state of Sudan, which despite considerable autonomy for the Southern Region, preserves a single structure of national authority. Cameroon has never taken up the mission a few of its political leadership have entertained for it, to be a spokesman if not a "pilot" for African unity. The country has been a frequent but never a staring participant in the institutions and special missions of African diplomacy. The present book does not yet provide us with the study one wishes to see on Cameroon's role in African and broader international relations.

A final question of signal significance is, "has Cameroon's success in state-building been translated into economic success? and for whom?" Kwame Nkrumah is often quoted as having summed up the modern priorities of African nationalism by saying, "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all things else shall be added unto you." Now Africans are waiting to judge the truth of that dictum. The present volume contributes importantly to our understanding of the forces at work that shape the country's economic order. We have still to determine the significance of that order, and my remaining comments are a preliminary exploration of that issue.

THE ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT

"Has Cameroon been successful in its efforts to develop?" This is a deceptively simple question.

No doubt the governmental leadership feels that it has been successful, and popular attitudes generally seem to reflect basic satisfaction and optimism. Admittedly, the hard evidence describing public opinion on the matter is not available for the whole country. This volume explores some aspects of popular attitudes among the West Cameroonians. Nonetheless, the superficial data available reflects well on Cameroon.

Nonetheless, it is not clear that Cameroon is successful, if we consider development to require the transformation of the colonial economy to permit a sustaining pattern of growth away from dependency on factors of production and decisions made outside the country, a pattern of growth based on factors of production under the country's own ownership and/or control. Such a pattern is necessary if the economy is not to stagnate before real development is achieved. In these respects, while not yet clearly a failure, Cameroon seems not to have made the necessary changes, and is therefore likely to be more like than unlike its neighbors in terms of its economic future. The picture is a mixed one, however, with positive and negative features.

The Positive Features

With respect to the announced goals of the Government, it is hard to fault the rhetoric used in Cameroon's documents that represent and guide the economic planning process. The general themes appear in President Ahidjo's speech presenting the Fourth Five Year Plan to the National Assembly in September 1976. He claimed that Cameroon was being guided in its development efforts by four broad principles: 1) "le developpement auto-centre," for which "self-oriented" or even "self-reliant" might be a better translation than the litteral one; 2) "liberalisme plainfie," or a liberal economy that mixes planning and state participation with private enterprise; 3) "developpement equilibre," or with equity not only as between city and countryside, but the regions of the country and the sectors of the economy; and 4) "la justice sociale," or a humanistic approach to improving the social welfare of the people. These guiding principles would find widespread support among the leaders and intellectuals of Africa. The more socialistic minded persons might assert that a large role for private enterprise, especially if it involves international capital, would undermine satisfaction of the other goals, and those with a more capitalistic bent might argue that substantial state planning and control would stifle initiative and bog development efforts down in bureaucratic bumbling, and thus also undermine the achievement of the other goals.

President Ahidjo's elaboration of his meaning for the characterization "auto-centre" tilts his rhetoric towards the more "progressive" formulations for the development approaches of African regimes with quite a different character from that of Cameroon:

> Le developpement auto-centre, qui pour nous signifie d'abord developpement du peuple par le peuple, respond a la necessite de mobiliser toutes les ressources et toutes les energie nationales en vue du developpement, car nous sommes profondement convaincus qu'il n'est de developpement authentique que celui qui repose sur l'effort productif et createur du peuple.
>
> Self oriented development, which for us signifies primarily the development of the people by the people, responds to the necessity to mobilize all the national resources and the whole of the national energy in the development effort, because we are profoundly convinced that the only authentic development is that which is based on the productive and creative effort of the people themselves.

However, Ahidjo explains that the liberal part of the program reflects a conviction that "private initiative remains the best motor for development, although the state, being responsible for protecting the general interest, should mobilize, coordinate, and guide all development efforts." It was President Nyerere who pointed out that, with so little capital and managerial strength of their own, Africans who promote a system of private enterprise are really promoting a system dominated by foreign enterprises. What may be true for Tanzania may also be true for Cameroon.

On the performance side, however, Cameroon has done well. Throughout the 1960s it enjoyed one of Africa's highest rates of growth in gross national product, with annual average rates of increase during the second half of the decade nearly 7%. Planned targets for growth during the 1970s were even higher, and despite stagnation in mid-decade as

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Cameroon also reflected the energy crisis and the general pattern of world inflation, it was among the first African states to recover and at decade's end was booming. Although the goals of the Third Five Year Plan, 1971-76, gave prominence to the satisfaction of basic social needs and to infrastructure, it had an important place for agriculture, in an effort at a "Green Revolution" that has been proclaimed successful. Although the Fourth Plan is styled one that will emphasize industrial development, the figure for investment in agriculture raises the rate from the 9% of the Third Plan to 15%.

Cameroon also had plans to diversify its production for export, in order to protect itself from the rapid fluctuations in prices that bedevil African products in the world markets. This diversification would come by increasing the role of the industrial sector, basically, but also by increasing production of strong agricultural products such as Arabica and Robusta coffee. They also desired to find new customers for their products and expected to gain markets as Cameroon participated in the expansion and trade unification of the European Common Market.

Exploration for petroleum has been proceeding, and discoveries of unannounced dimensions have been made. An air of cautious optimism pervades Yaounde, as work proceeds frantically to build their own refinery, and the basis for an integrated petrochemical industry. The country is not yet to be compared with Nigeria, or even with Angola, in terms of what oil might do for its economic future, but there is at least reasonable expectation that it may be self sufficient in energy resources. Part of the reason Cameroonian officials are so guarded in talking about their petroleum resources is reported to be to avoid arousing popular expectations that might later be disappointed, but part may be due to the location, West Cameroon, which may therefore find its nationalist commitment to the "Kamerun Idea" tested as never before.

The Negative Features

Despite the goals we have described and the efforts made toward reaching them, Cameroon has not made dramatic progress in lessening its dependency on its traditional partners, or in establishing a pattern of growth that might avoid blacked development paths in the future.

Weak Exports. The pattern persists, at least through the mid-1970s, of prominence among the exports of crops that are bulky and that provide a portion of the total value of exports lower than their proportion of the total volume, In 1965, the most prominent of these exports were palm kernels and palm products, fresh bananas, and all the products of wood, especially logs and unprocessed wood. These items remained a prominent feature of the export pattern in 1975. In fact, the proportion of total exports that raw wood represented actually increased. Bananas were no less prominent, and cocoa, which is a favorable product in this regard had decreased as a proportion of exports. The only two products with a very favorable position in terms of value versus volume of exports which actually gained in their importance among the country's exports was Arabica coffee and rubber products.

Although industrial production has increased in the country, these products do not figure importantly among exports, and of those which do, especially to the central African region, many are products that simply have passed through Cameroon with virtually no value added there. Exports from the secondary sector have fluctuated substantially but tend to amount to about 16-18% of the total exports, in value, with highs of 23% in 1969 and 33% in 1974. In the latter case, the value of exports rose due, in part, to the inflation caused by the rises in petroleum prices. Cameroon has not achieved much diversification of production.

Future plans for the agricultural and primary sectors may change the pattern slightly, as the country not only continues to emphasize production of basic foodstuffs for local consumption, but also emphasizes those export agricultural crops that generally have returned more money than the average in relation to their volume and products whose prices are likely to remain strong--such as cocoa, coffee, cotton, rice, sugar, rubber. But there has also continued to be an emphasis placed on export of wood which has not been a strong export earner in relation to other products.

Poor Articulation of Sectors. Cameroon continues to have a very poor indigenous capital goods sector. Some indication of the build-up in this sector is seen in the items that the country exports in substantial quantities--hand tools, farm tools for hand and for use with animals, and electric batteries. But these products do not represent sufficient development of the intermediate capital goods sector, and some of these items, along with many other industrial items, are apparently imported and then exported, with little value-added in the real sense (although there may be a substantial price increase in some cases). Cameroon now manufactures electric batteries, for example, but also continues to import a substantial number of them. A number of other items that would appear to be amenable to local manufacture continue to figure prominently among Cameroon's imports--saws, pliers, domestic utensils and tools, tongs and other forge materials, and miscellaneous agricultural tools. So here also Cameroon has not yet sufficently diversified its production.

In its Third Five Year Plan indications are given of an intention to develop a number of important local capital goods industries, such as a fertilizer plant, expansion of cement production capacity, processing plants for metal products such as structural iron bars and beams, scrap iron processing, rolled sheet metal, and a petroleum refinery, as well as plants for making electrical batteries, tires and inner tubes, paper pulp, ceramics, and tanning. But, all of these items are also repeated in the Fourth Plan, and although it is not obvious that nothing was accomplished on them in the previous plan, they are most likely either a continuation or even the initiation of the project, rather than a further expansion or duplication of them. There are additional industrial projects in the Fourth Plan, which includes provision for a plant to make nails and spikes, brick making plants in rural locations, electric cable making, an extrusion plant for aluminum sheets and beams, plants for making hardware, one for making electric motor parts, and a plant for processing wood, including milling, rolling, and veneering. In all, the investment in the industrial-mining-and energy sector, which goes far beyond the intermediate capital goods category, of course, is planned to amount to nearly 290 million francs CFA, or about 29% of the total investment program. However, the projects I have mentioned above, including those that seem to repeat ones in the previous plan, only amount to about 50 million francs, or less than seven percent (7%) of the total. So, the great bulk of the secondary industry investment seems to be going into the basic industries for export and extraction.

Already relatively industrialized in comparison to the other states in the region, much of Cameroon's industrial export strength is based on trans-shipping. The country's industrial "strength" more generally is based on cheaply processing imported bauxite for the European market or import substitution for consumer items. The aluminum smelting plant the French firm Pechiney-Ugine built at Edea in the early 1950s has depended until now on ores owned by the same and other French companies operating in Guinea and elsewhere. Recent plans repeat the often mentioned Cameroonian hope to open up its own deposits of bauxite for exploitation. The aluminum produced in Cameroon has not been oriented to local markets, but there has been some slight spill-over to them, in items such as roofing and other building materials, kitchen ware and other small utensils. Mostly what Cameroon produces in manufactures are luxury or general consumption goods, such as cloth and clothing, shoes, cigarettes, and bottled drinks, especially beer.

The structure of Cameroonian imports has shifted slightly but has not been transformed. It has lessened somewhat its dependency on basic foodstuffs, lowering the proportion of total value of imports represented by food from 12.5% in 1965 to less than 6% in 1975. There was a modest increase in the proportion represented by capital goods, which rose from 21% to about 25%. And there was a surprisingly modest increase in the costs of energy resources, which went from 4.5% to 7.3% of the total. The rest of the import structure remained basically the same as before.

It is safe to say that Cameroon remains far from achieving the structural transformation of imports or of domestic production one normally would associate with real development.

<u>Dependency on Foreign Capital</u>. Cameroon also has yet to lessen its dependency on outside capital. The Government has taken pride repeatedly in being able to balance its operational budget from its own resources, which has happened in a good many years since independence. Its own fiscal and productive resources have also been used to make substantial contributions to the total (national level and provincial level) development budgets. Such contributions will amount to about 22% of the financing for the Fourth Plan. Nevertheless, Cameroon remains dependent on foreign sources for the great bulk of its development financing. Direct foreign subsidies

will cover about 4% of the current Plan, and foreign borrowing an additional 45%. The private sector, also almost all foreign, is expected to provide about 29% of the total funds needed. Thus foreign sources account for nearly three quarters of the total funds.

The foreign sources account for about the same proportion of financing for the Fourth Plan as for the Third. In the previous plan direct subventions were up to 10%, loans another 16% and private investment an additional 48%. For the plan prior to that one, the Second Plan, the foreign component was probably even higher, inasmuch as the proportion of foreign funding for just the publicly supported components was about 65%.

Foreign capital is readily welcomed in Cameroon, which has a very liberal investment code that is ably discussed in Dr. Ndongko's chapter in this work. It is also plainly evident from the material in that chapter, as well as that in Dr. Clignet's chapter, that foreign investment has not reduced the income and employment disparities among Cameroonians or among the regions of the country.

It appears that Cameroon is more generous to foreign capital than normal business practices require. This may be due to lack of experience, a deliberate leniency, or pressures from its aid and diplomatic partners (especially France). Whatever the reason, the dimensions of the problem are hinted at by the following discussion of a single case study.

Recently several international investors (including a multilateral lender) joined with the Cameroon Government in sponsoring a project to cut, process and ship timber and timber products, in which industry Cameroon has long been active. The project was developed and was to be managed by a foreign partnership that was formed explicitly for the purpose by a well established French firm. The Partnership will own forty percent of the share holdings, the same as the Cameroonian Government agency. According to investment proposals for the project, the international public investor would provide (through an intermediary) a loan that would amount to nearly twice the equity inputs of the French Partnership, but would receive only half the equity shares. Additionally, the intermediary itself was to match the first loan, but for no equity shares. Other banks would also loan to the project an even greater amount, to produce a debt to equity ratio of about three to one. This is a level that is higher than what most lenders grant directly to private firms in developing countries. Indeed, one must wonder if the French firm would have been able to mobilize that amount of capital on its own, and this is all guaranteed by the Cameroonian Government.

The story continues, however. The French firm was engaged to provide the preliminary organization of the project, for which it was guaranteed a lump sum payment of at least $704,000 (with increases for inflation). This for a project in which it is a 40% equity owner. The firm was also to receive an exclusive right to market the project's output outside the local region, some 87% of the total output. For this "service" the firm was to receive a commission amounting to 8% of the f.o.b. price, despite the fact that it would be marketing the product to itself and would thus also make additional profits from its resale. These commissions alone were estimated to amount to some $8m over the first ten years. Additionally, the firm was projected to receive $576,000 in distributed profits (the Government would receive an equal amount) and rights to $682,000 in undistributed profits over the first nine years. Were all these profits to be spread evenly over the nine years they would represent an annual return on the equity investment of 29%, an unusually high rate for non-petroleum projects even in the underdeveloped world.

Of course, this project was to generate employment--about six hundred fifty jobs for local people. But despite a built-in training program, the number of expatriate staff in top management positions was to fall only from fifteen to eleven during the first three years, which was as long as there were any specific plans spelled out for a training program.

Perhaps it is the making of arrangements such as the above that keeps Cameroon and other countries like it, which so aggressively pursue foreign capital, underdeveloped.

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