Is Democracy in Africa a Blessing or a curse? The Concept of Power: The Case of Cameroon

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Annotation: Democracy is a political and social system by which the people are the source of sovereignty and power. There is a problem when the people cannot participate and deliberate in aspects that concern their rights. Democracy in relation to the concept of power as the case of Cameroon may apply could be associated in the light of a conflict between the will to give and not to give the people their rights to develop themselves. Power has been centralized for over three decades since democracy was re-introduced in Cameroon. Centralization of power created a vacuum between the Centre and the local populations and has greatly affected the two Anglophone regions in conflict. This and many other setbacks of democracy have tempted many to consider the term as a curse when relating to Cameroon. The only solution as gathered through investigative research would be to fully decentralize the structures in place and the local populations empowered to ensure equal opportunities. Decentralization would grant total autonomy to the local councils to develop themselves. In a democracy, the people have the right to choose their leaders but in a case where the head of the executive controls the other arms of government like the legislature and the judiciary and appoints persons to strategic positions to pay allegiance to the head rather than ruling the people who own the power, obviously generates into conflict when the people can no longer bear the sufferings and marginalized tendencies.

Keywords: Democracy, power, blessing, curse.

Introduction

The origins of the term 'democracy' could be traced further back from Indian subcontinent to the Phoenician empire. (Keane, 2009:16). The differentiation between the rulers and the ruled in ancient Greek city states was not as sharp as today, though both could be clearly distinguished from each other (Dahl, 2015:11 - 2; Sartori, 1987:280 - 1.) As a form of government, it is generally defined as power of the people, by the people and for the people. By implication, the government must belong to the people and not imposed from outside; the citizens, not outsiders, must set the rules; and it should be a means of helping the people achieve their aspirations, without which, conflict would obviously arise as a result of inbuilt grievances resulting from suppression and marginalizing; as a consequence misery and suffering becomes a visible reality which will cause many to therefore see democracy as a curse.

Democracy was reintroduced in Cameroon since 30 years ago but rather the gains of this process has not been perceived by the people who are usually the center of the entire process and has instead lead to conflict which has degenerated into a full blown war leaving outnumbered casualties. The crave for democracy has been on the political agenda of Cameroon for over three decades but the researchers who have written in this domain stressed on the concept of democratisation and never foresaw the present war and future ramifications. Selling the goat and holding the rope, deprives the peoples desires and rights which simply generates into conflict and subsequently war. No one could imagine that because of conflict the Cameroon Development

Corporation (CDC) could abandoned most of its banana, palm oil, and rubber plantations and owing as much as years' worth of back pay to 6,000 of its 22,000 workers, many of whom were retrenched for conflict reasons; Same with the Palm Oil Company (PAMOL) and other agro industrial companies who say they are now heavily indebted because of the conflict.

Background

Democracy in Cameroon, Africa and the World

Despite the spread of democracy globally, it faces challenges. (Badmus, 2014:259) observes that "it is not universally accepted and practiced," given the contradictions surrounding it. According to Badmus, "there still exist difficulties in adopting and translating its holistic values into the framework of development in most parts of the world." He attributes factors hindering the proper translation of the values of democracy to poor development of democratic institutions, ideological confusion and misconceptions, (Badmus, 2014:259).

Historically, democracy is a political term of Greek origin that literally means "rule of the people" or a "form of government in which all citizens have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives". The concept of democracy evolved over time and has come to refer to various forms of majority rule while ensuring the rights of minorities, acceptance of pluralism, and the separation of powers within a system of government. The term "democracy" is often used as shorthand for liberal democracy, which may include elements such as political pluralism; equality before the law; the right to petition elected officials for redress of grievances; due process; civil liberties; human rights; and elements of civil society outside the government.

In the same vain, understanding of the term democracy can be traced back to a state of affairs that can be detected in history. The Greek city states are usually the points of reference where *demokratia* flourished around 450 BCE (Dahl, 2015:11; Dunn, 2005:24). Democracy is however of older origin, traced back to the bronze-age civilization around 1500–1200 BCE in Peloponnese. There *dāmos* meant powerless people who had common land and *damokoi* an official who acted on behalf of the *dāmos*. The story of democracy often travels from Greek city states through the Roman republic, Renaissance Italy, and even Scandinavian forms of local assemblies by Vikings to modern representative democracies following the great revolutions of the 18th century (Dahl, 2015: 7–25; as in Keane, 2009:880). Assembly-based democracy had been invented even earlier further east in the area where Syria, Iraq, and Iran are now situated. (Keane, 2009:11).

Civilized societies tend to refer to the Greek etymology when defining democracy; rule of the people, *demos* and *kratia* combined (Held, 1987:2; Sartori, 1987:21). Democracy as a political system was in Greek distinguished from monarchy, in which one person made the decisions, and aristocracy, in which a few made the decisions (Mayo, 1970:28). The institutional arrangements also examined the meaning of democracy that were put in place in ancient Greece. The usual norm was that the polis was governed by an assembly made up of adult male citizens. The origins of this 'assembly democracy' could be traced further back from Indian subcontinent to the Phoenician empire. (Keane, 2009:16). The differentiation between the rulers and the ruled in ancient Greek city states was not as sharp as today, though both could be clearly distinguished from each other (Dahl, 2015:11–2; Sartori, 1987:280–1.) As a form of government, it is generally defined as power of the people, by the people and for the people. By implication, the government must belong to the people and not imposed from outside; the citizens, not outsiders, must set the rules; and it should be a means of helping the people achieve their aspirations, without which, conflict would obviously arise as a result of inbuilt grievances resulting from suppression and marginalizing; as a consequence misery and suffering becomes a visible reality.

The current understanding of democracy includes the idea of the freedom of opinion, religion and conscience, the freedom of expression, of the press, of assembly and of association, the freedom of trade unionism and the right to strike. Like ancient democracy, also this form of democracy can be traced back to historical events and periods of time. The analysis above shows how conflict can evolve when the people are not involved and rather suppressed of their rights and freedoms. The historical part of democracy and conflict did not only end at the global level but Africa also had a unique history that could be traced.

Africa's democratic wave of the 1990s and 2000s has been termed "second independence" reminiscent of anti-colonial struggles of the 1950 and 60s which led to the end of European colonial projects in Africa (Eke, 1995:25). Historical processes like decolonisation and the collapse of communism gave a lee way for the integration of democracy in Africa as analysed by some scholars to have occurred in fairly recent history of the early 1990s. (Gylfason 2013:6-11). Doorenspleet and Nijzink (2014) discuss how democratisation occurred in African states like Ghana, when governments were democratically elected through party systems, which they present to be a hallmark of gauging democracy. There is a variety of explanations throughout the scholarly discourse on what prompted democratisation in Africa. Adejumobi (2015) articulates that one key indicator of democracy being introduced to Africa was "the introduction of multiparty elections in most African countries during the 1990s. Adejumobi (2015) brought up the idea that, prior to democracy, most post-colonial states were authoritarian due to "internal and external factors" including volatile circumstances socially and economically. According to his account, stark divisions of "ethnicity, religion, class, and region" across African states were a key impediment to the democratic management of a state's affairs, which has since been overcome to an extent, with numerous states being identified as 'free' by Freedom House (2018). Gylfason (2013) wrote that democratic systems of government saw substantial increases when communist regimes in Europe fell, which had the knock on effect of increasing the number of democracies across the African continent. He states that "the number of democracies in Africa rose from four to 17 while the number of autocracies fell down to single digits". The advantages of incorporating a democratic system of government over autocratic regimes include reducing the likelihood of corruption according to Gylfason, who states "democracy tends to hinder corruption and help growth" by promoting education and governance in the public interest.

Methodology

This work implores qualitative methodology to examine whether democracy in Africa is a blessing or a curse? Considering the Concept of Power in Cameroon. Data utilized include primary and secondary data generated from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), field observations, some guided interviews, journals and books. This research is purely qualitative, meaning it is based on a naturalist inquiry or field studies because it seeks to describe and analyse whether democracy in Africa is a blessing or a curse taking into consideration the case Cameroon. This research has made use of the natural settings, meaning individuals and institutions within the country, contacted for information related to variables like conflict and democratisation guiding the problem under study in this research. This is therefore a flexible and interactive research because the concepts and themes under study here are quite familiar and understood by a majority of the respondents during discussions.

Data used for analysis in this work has been generated from both primary and secondary data sources through the focus group discussions organized and internet based research (social media), journals, thesis and books.

Despite the use of a number of research designs in this study because of its interdisciplinary nature. The descriptive design will help report the findings in this research, formulation of important principles of knowledge and solutions to significant problems raised through personal and public judgments, classification, analysis, comparison and interpretation of data obtained through focus group discussions with a sample of individuals. A case study survey design will just compliment the descriptive design as the main research design in this work by detailing the description and context after and in-depth investigation of whether democracy is a blessing or a curse in Africa at large and in Cameroon in particular. In brief, the experimental design will help this work as well to assess the degree of relationship that exist between the terms democratization, blessing, curse and conflict.

Analysis

The lack of the practice of democracy in most African countries especially Cameroon has led to intrastate Conflict that has harrowing societal effects. This type of conflict has in many cases resulted in loss of lives and leave a legacy of disability due to injury and disease. Conflicts resulting from poor governance, inertia and lack of political will create economic deprivation and traumatise people, and have regional effects in terms of disease and displacement (Hoeffler, 2008:7–10; 12–20). Violent conflict between civilian armed groups and the state military like the case in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon has been common on the African continent for many decades. According to findings related to this paper, one cannot say that democracy is a curse in Africa because it is actually working in some countries like Ghana, for example Damola Adejumo-Ayibiowu in his article of November 6, 2019 stood firm to the that fact that democracy is not alien to Africa and went further to clarify the term democracy in this context. Democracy is derived from two Greek words "demos" meaning people and "kratos" meaning rule. Translating directly, democracy means a form of government in which the people rule. Thus, democracy is largely about the ability of the people to determine who rules them, by which law they are ruled and also make the ruler conform to the will of the people. In short, a democracy is a representative and responsive government. By this definition, many African traditional governance systems are democratic. The Yoruba traditional governance system and the traditional governance of Akan Ghana are exemplary democracies because even though these kingdoms are monarchical, they are representative, participatory, and have adequate checks and balances. For the sake of distinguishing the democracy of these traditional institutions from Western-style democracy, it shall be called a cultural democracy. These two examples can at least testify on the political scene through the rotation of their Presidency. The case of Cameroon is quite unique and cannot be termed a curse or a blessing because the country is said to be in the process of democratization. Democratization is an ongoing process though at quite a very slow pace.

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The pre-unification period in the NW and SW Regions can best explain what development by the people meant at that time. The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), on the 11th of May 2020 reports that the Anglophone Crisis affecting Cameroon's North West and South West Regions has caused immense physical harm and psychological suffering to the civilian

population, including women and children. Since the crisis's escalation in 2016, both parties to the conflict have committed gross human rights abuses.

This power centric syndrome of most African heads of state does not in any way favour those of the opposition who wish to pilot the state of affairs in a new dispensation.

This phenomenon of patrimonial and personalised management of public affairs now runs through every facet of the Cameroonian bureaucracy. No one sees his/her office as a civil/state property for which service has to be granted without favours; Ngwane (2004:6) analyses that tribalism, nepotism, laxity and egoism are now at loggerheads with nationalism and patriotism. These are all ills that have been slowing down the democratisation process in the country.

Le Vine (1964), Mbembe (1996), Joseph (1977:43-56), Thobie et al. (1990), report that the French started a program of public works overseen by a considerably reinforced colonial administration in the 1920s. In net economic terms, the policy was a success, with trade multiplying by five times between 1922 and 1938. This also had a profound impact on the indigenous society. They implored forced labour though prohibited under the mandate's terms. Under the law of the indigenous people of the French colonies, introduced in Cameroon in 1924, local administrators exercised unchecked power over colonial subjects; arbitrary beatings and whippings were a feature of life.

Local chieftaincies (first to third degree chiefs) were reorganised by both the British and the French and graded according to importance as analysed by Geschiere P. (1993) and Mbembe (1996). In some cases, these changes reinforced the role of previously accepted traditional authorities, while in others chieftaincies were simply created in order to organise labour and collect taxes. In the north, local traditional and religious leaders had negotiated with the Germans to maintain their authority in return for tribute payments and formal acknowledgement of colonial sovereignty. The French maintained this arrangement. The reordering of local politics and the new resources available to those who could claim traditional authority (chiefs kept a portion of taxes raised, and often used forced labour for their private profit) sparked off disputes over chiefs' legitimacy, many of which rumble on today destabilising our society.

The constitutions that guide Western-style democracy in Africa and Cameroon in particular are mostly borrowed modifications of colonial laws which sometimes disagree with the local cultural realities of the people. An African is naturally a moral being with a firm public culture of morality based on a strong sense of shame and conscience for the individual who behaves contrary to the common good of the community and such a person can face a stringent punishment such as banishment from the traditional council. Scholars in this domain have postulated that the divergence between colonial laws and African values created a hybridized modern culture which shamelessly supports corruption in the public sector. African cultural democracies makes it possible for checks and balances to maintain good moral standards and improved wellbeing and social development. We cannot say here that good leaders can always emerge from traditional African democracies but sure every society has mechanism to make leaders conform to the will of the people or they receive a vote of non-confidence.

Recent studies on Cameroon traditional governance found a worthy cultural democracy. Findings show that the strategies which ensure responsiveness, participation and accountability among the traditional societies of the people from the grassland and forest areas include decentralization of governance with autonomous subunits, people's involvement, family representation in government, consultations, high moral standards of leadership, non-monetization of political positions, the supremacy of the culture, leadership training, traditional oath-taking, easy provision for the deposition of unresponsive leadership, communal effort to achieve development, low cost

administrative structure, hard work and equal access to resources. Most at times these structures clash with the western style of democracy imposed on these societies by the government which obviously accepts modern democracy as a means to survive at the international level.

Over centralization and non-separation of powers has led to unemployment or employment bias leaving most of the younger population frustrated and wanting along the streets. Regions and Local Councils in the context of decentralization would have better understood their developmental needs related to education, health and the judiciary rather than the top bottom approach from the Centre.

The conflict in the NW and SW regions is conceptual in a way that the Centre promises and never granting thereby generating into a physical conflict which has made life unbearable because people are afraid to go out of their homes, move around the streets for their day to day activities, children cannot go to school, business men and women cannot go to work, the economy grounded as a result of the conflict. These regions have been economically grounded because of the current war which escalated from a mere crisis. Economic development means peace and without peace there would be no development. When this work talk of conceptual conflict it does not limit it to NW and SW but researching round the entire country portrays that many regions especially some divisions in the Centre, East, South and Northern regions lack good roads, health facilities, educational establishments but will not advocate for their rights like the Anglophone regions. The special statutes granted to the two Anglophone regions are borrowed concepts and can never be a substitute for decentralization nor a solution to decentralization. The people need to feel involved and participate in their own development. The people should be able to generate their own income and manage their affairs.

Recommendations

Democratic lapses such as poor governance and lack of political will have led to escalated conflicts over the years to full blown out war in some African countries because the people have become aware of what they are supposed to have which they do not have (autonomy, self-governance). The ability to identify their needs (road infrastructure, electricity, water, meaningful employment and so on) and carry out development projects in the identified areas of their interest are very strong recommendations which if granted will change the living standards of the people and by so doing we shall realize that democracy can never be a curse but a blessing to those countries that practice it genuinely.

The pre-unification people had a sense of local autonomy. They dug and maintained their road infrastructure. They generated and managed their own electricity (no privatization). There was self-reliant development. Other regions like the East face similar problems on road and infrastructure, electricity and water, but their level of awareness of the injustice may still be believed to be at a dormant stage awaiting eruption as the case in the regions in crisis today. It is therefore recommended that the people be given their full autonomy to permit them carry on developmental projects that can help themselves.

Over centralization destroyed regional autonomy and robbed the regions of local development. "Fonds Spécial d'Equipement et d'Intervention Intercommunale" (FEICOM) that is responsible for assisting the councils confiscated the tools of development like the machinery for road maintenance. From thence for example, the NW and SW regions of Cameroon that had witnessed developmental strides prior to unification fell back. Today, these regions locked in war are less developed than they were decades ago. Hence, conflict and the style of democratisation proves they are enemies to development. Development means peace and without peace through strong state institutions, it is obvious that no economic development will take place. Peaceful coexistence is

encouraged in situations like these so that regions with stronger and more sustainable regional councils could support those with week sustenance.

Conclusion

Democratisation is making democracy work. It entails making democracy efficient in a country where it has been adopted. However, it must be noted that democratisation requires vision, commitment, patience and hard work, because it does not happen automatically. For that reason, Charles C. Hauss (August 2003) asserts that, "Democratisation takes time because it requires the development of new institutions and widespread trust in them, which almost never happens quickly."

Thus, the concept of democratisation could be grouped into these essentially contested concepts as suggested by Gallie (1962:121): power, justice, peace, freedom, equality (see also Ojoh, E.O, 1999; Omotola, 2007:249). Hence, the essence of democracy is inclusiveness, participation and civil liberty. All these will bring about peace which if absent is tantamount to escalating conflict. Man's egoistic attitudes have brought about bad governance and political systems as some of the setbacks to genuine democracy whose absence has been misinterpreted by many who suffer the consequences as a curse meanwhile those who enjoy the benefits of modern democracy judge it as a blessing.

Conclusively, democracy is to a larger extent has been a curse to most African societies because African cultural democracy contains cultural features which are able to compel African people and their rulers to comply with cultural laws. Western democracy has greatly negatively affected many ethnic cultures in Cameroon. The lack of cultural elements is a strong reason why Western-style democracy has led to distortions in Africa and Cameroon in Particular rather than progress. Instead of replicating Western liberal democracies and their neoliberal reforms, Africa and Cameroon in particular has a lot to learn from its culture. The danger of a borrowed democracy or any ideology is that it may in addition to its fascinating qualities contain other non-cultural elements which may be harmful to the society. The challenge for Cameroon policymakers therefore is how to consciously and continuously study various indigenous African societies like Ghana and Nigeria for valuable democratic principles and practices which can be adapted to reflect contemporary situations for better governance and development.

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