

Socio-Cultural Groupings and the Gender Phenomenon in Local Elections in Cameroon since the 1990s

By

Henry Kam Kah
University of Buea, Cameroon
E-mail: ndangso@yahoo.com
(237) 7742 74 99

Background to Study

The history and character of elections at the local level in Cameroon is a tricky one. Multiparty politics characterised the closing years of the colonial era leading up to the independence and reunification of the country. After independence arguments were quickly raised to dispel the rationale of this culture in the body politic of the reunited Cameroon. This coincided with the evolution of things in the rest of Africa as affected by the Cold War politics. It took the debilitating effects of the world economic slump of the 1980s and the early 1990s to once more unleash a kind of venomous wave of radical change that blew across Africa with a very high velocity destroying existing conservative forces along its way.

While the centre had continued to dictate the pace of events in local politics and electoral consultations, from the decade of the 1990s onwards, there has been a steady emergence of a force in the political landscape of Cameroon which was little or not known in the previous experiences. This force is the increasing gender sensitive behaviour among the numerous social groupings with regards to participation in local choices for representatives in party politics at the national level. The result has been a combination of the aspirations of the greedy self seeking elite with those of gluttonous gender sex conscious local collaborators.

The local sexes are devising new ways of outsmarting each other in getting to the centre as the people's representatives. This is what may be termed the “ **gender base decision approach**” in national politics. In the past this was not usually the case because decisions were most often taken from above and implemented below. Besides, at the base these decisions were overwhelmingly decided and implemented by the men while women looked on. Local women today see themselves as key stakeholders in the unfolding melodrama of political control at the base to strengthen the top.

Statement of Purpose

In many multiparty elections conducted in Cameroon from the colonial era to 1966 when the single party was put in place and from 1992 to the

present, the issue of gender representation or participation never played a crucial role in determining the choice of candidates in elections. During the 1970s otherwise the women decade, women projected issues of representation to take central place in political discourses as a way of weakening the deficit perspective to their empowerment. This did not however materialise in the Cameroonian political landscape because of the entrenched philosophy of single party politics through clientelism and patronage led by male leaders of the country.

Women socio-cultural groups and other local professionally conscious groups have today participated in democratic elections in different ways. Self seeking elite women like their male counterparts have appealed to these groups as stepping stones to aspire to represent their constituents at the national level. This is a phenomenon intended to overturn the hitherto 'sit tightism' of their male counterparts. There are also attempts by women mobilisers who belong to detribalised socio-cultural groups at political inter-ethnicisation by appealing to the gender factor. Other women have spearheaded the formation of civil society organisations to lobby for women representation in elective positions and for independent candidacies in democratic elections although this is still at the level of creating awareness. Other less educated women are agents of food distribution from candidates seeking for election. They collect the items that include rice, soap, meat, maggi, party T shirts and other ephemeral

items to distribute to their kith and kin. This is done through rallying the womenfolk through women messengers to a very popular spot. This distribution is accompanied by heavy drinking and other boisterous activities. At times this gluttonous attitude is carefully and neatly selectively done as only members of a party that has offered these items are called up to distribute these food items. The 'largesse' of donors of these items is to buy the consciences of the women electorate and by extension their family members. Many young girls are seen marching on national and youth days in party outfits given to them free by party barons and baroness to lure them to vote and also with promises of jobs when they write public 'competitive' examinations.

Objectives

This study aims at examining a new phenomenon of gender participation in local political activities which is now exploited by both local and external elite women and men. This development has not only introduced a new character in contemporary democratic experience in Cameroon but has also shown how the gluttonous attitude of the electorate is fuelled by the fact that if one can not make it to the top because of poverty one can at least make some gain out of electoral consultations even if these are ephemeral and cannot solve the problems of misery, unemployment and abnegation in the Cameroon body politic in the long run.

Literature Review

The democratic experience in Cameroon has received a lot of attention meaning therefore that much ink has flowed on various aspects and experiences of this phenomenon in this country. Kah (2003), Melville (2004), Monga (2000), Mbuagbo and Akoko (2004), Mbuagbo and Fru (2003), Ngolle (1996), Sonne (1997) and Socpa (2002) have discussed among other issues the intrigues involved in elections, the use of autochthony and allogene to create bitterness, and the use also of the concept of 'village' as a new paradigm for popular representation. Others like Ngoh (2001) and Mbu (1993) have discussed the responsibility of Cameroon for the failure of democracy to make a positive impact and civil disobedience respectively as a weapon to advance the democratic process in Cameroon. On his part Nyamnjoh (1996c; 2002c; 2003 and 2005) and Ndembiyembe (1997) have examined democracy in Cameroon from several dimensions including chiefs and politics, the media in a democratic dispensation and the place of tribalism in the democratic evolution in the country. In as much as these are enlightening to understanding the democratic practice this study is observing an emerging strand which is the appeal to gender not necessarily for the sake of it but as new strategies to involve the grassroots not in the elite politics of greed but encourage them through gluttonous activities to embrace

politics to determine action at the centre without necessarily being there. This therefore makes for *greedocracy* fuelling *gluttonocracy* to produce what can be conveniently described as *greedo-gluttono-crazy*. This practice attempts to perfectly link the centre with the periphery and the male with the female electorate through what we have earlier described as “gender base-decision-approach.”

Relevance of Study

This study is significant because although democracy has a global appeal and parameters of evaluation, it takes on its own specific characteristics at the local level depending on the realities of the field. It is even more important in that the historical experience of Cameroon like other African countries south of the Sahara is so rich that understanding democracy can not entirely be an imposition from the North. The local environment and experiences that Cameroon has gone through the years are informative and will contribute to debates on theoretical issues on the practice of democracy and the argument about its global applicability of this concept.

Even the global influences on African societies like Cameroon have led to the development of new phenomena which hardly fit into the western model without some discrepancies. Contrary to the notion religiously held in some western circles like the financial institutions that democracy is a yardstick for measuring governance, the experience in

Cameroon has shown that in the practice of democracy some of the worst practices like buying of voters are brought to the fore thereby challenging this notion.

Besides, in the Cameroon cultural landscape, interest peddling, gender and history have evolved a democratic experience that has made defenders of the status quo to argue that the country is experiencing *democratie avancee*. This alone is born out of the Cameroon character which allows for certain practices that are anathema to the tenets of democracy. This tolerant spirit has therefore enlightened many on the emerging strands of democracy that scholars of this area of study need get into to prove new paradigms in the democratic practice.

Methodology/ Sources

Considering the contemporary nature of this experience, the methodology of conducting discussions with actors was carried out. This meant that the women participants either as elite or facilitators were interviewed. Besides, we consulted newspaper reports about the character of democracy in selected local constituencies of Cameroon. The participation observation technique was used to analyse the phenomenon that is now emerging.

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