

## **Cameroon Opposition: Unraveling the Single-Candidate Chimera**

In an article written shortly after the October 1997 Presidential elections (when Bello Bouba's UNDP broke away from an alliance with the SDF to join the Biya Government), political analyst, Dibussi Tande, deciphered the problem of opposition disunity in Cameroon and the systemic inability of the said opposition to come up with either a common platform or single candidate to challenge Paul Biya. He argued that the search for a single opposition candidate had so far failed because of an inability to understand the ideological motivations of Cameroon's political actors. As he put it:

**Cameroonian politics is not just about an unending war of attrition between pro-government and pro-opposition forces. It is primarily about a political fault line that cuts across the opposition/CPDM dichotomy, and pits progressive parties on the one hand against conservative forces on the other.**

Seven years later, the ongoing drama around the selection of a single candidate by the CNRR seems to confirm Tande's analysis which first appeared on the CAMNET forum in November 1997. It is said that those who do not learn their history are condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past. We reprint Dibussi Tande's 1997 article so that readers can understand how the opposition failed to learn from history.

## UNDERSTANDING THE BELLO BOUBA/UNDP "BETRAYAL"

**By Dibussi Tande (CAMNET 1997)**

Many Cameroonians seem genuinely surprised at (and outraged) at Bello Bouba's most recent alliance with the CPDM, at the expense of the opposition front that boycotted the October presidential elections. Seasoned observers of the Cameroonian political scene, however, consider Bello Bouba's entry into government as nothing but a pseudo-surprise, if any at all. This is because since his return to Cameroon in August 1991, and his subsequent take-over of the UNDP presidency in January 1992, Bello Bouba and his party have always been most comfortable when dealing with the Biya regime -- dealings reminiscent of the North-South axis of the Ahidjo years-- than with the "hard core" opposition of the *Grand Ouest*.

The real surprise, in my opinion, is that for close to a year, an impressive number of Cameroonians truly believed that the UNDP/SDF gentleman's agreement initiated in Buea in December 1996, and later sealed Garoua in January 1997 with the Bello/Fru Ndi embrace, truly marked a new beginning for the opposition.; a new political era in which the UNDP would finally break free from the heavy shackles of history that had so far influenced its every move since its creation.

In reality, however, this was an alliance too good to be true-- and the SDF top brass knew this. However, in its desire to placate an increasing number of frustrated but naive Cameroonians who were screaming themselves hoarse about the indispensability of opposition unity at any cost, the SDF went ahead with the alliance, and wait patiently for the "bad news". And when the bad news did finally come, the SDF leadership was completely unfazed by it all.

## **Bello Bouba a Traitor?**

Beyond the present cries of betrayal and treason it is all but certain that the UDC/UNDP/SDF alliance was bound to eventually collapse for the same reason that there has never been a consensus over a single opposition candidate: the leading political parties in Cameroon are made up of very different ideological political stock, and they all have differing and sometimes conflicting methods of dealing with Cameroon's problems. It is quite certain that it won't be long before the UDC's Ndam Njoya goes back to his old habit of brandishing the SDF a "radical" (read extremist) party.

Did Bello Bouba actually betray the opposition and what the UNDP stood for? In my opinion, the over-analyzed Opposition/CPDM dichotomy in Cameroon politics fails woefully in this instance to explain Bello Bouba's actions. His actions can, however, be easily explained away by the very ideological and geostrategic underpinnings of the UNDP's philosophy. From this particular perspective, Cameroonian politics is not just about an unending war of attrition between pro-government and pro-opposition forces. It is primarily about a political fault line that cuts across the opposition/CPDM dichotomy, and pits progressive parties on the one hand against conservative forces on the other.

It is, therefore time for the Cameroonian public to pay closer attention to the (often derided) core ideologies that underlie the actions and positions of Cameroonian political parties, especially the big three. Understanding these ideologies would lead to the realization that for a sizable portion of Cameroonian political actors, the opposition/ CPDM dichotomy is of little relevance today, except when it is used for purposes of political expediency (e.g., the UNDP trying to rebuild its "capitale de sympathie nationale" after a disastrous performance in the legislative elections by allying with the SDF to boycott an election in which the former would have been severely pilloried anyway...)

## **Cameroon's Ideological Blocs**

While Cameroon may have a record 150 parties, the bottom line is that all these parties fall within three broad ideological blocs.

1) The first of these blocs is what I term the FADC (*Forces Anti-Démocratiques de l'Ancien Régime*). These are anti-democratic forces whose roots can be traced back to the CNU/Ahidjo dictatorship. This group is headed by the authoritarian conservatives (*conservateurs autoritaires*) of the CPDM, and include the plethora of parties who once formed what was commonly referred to back in 1992 as the "Majorité Présidentielle."

2) The second bloc is the NDAR (*Nouveaux Démocrates de l'Ancien Régime*). These are mainly the rear-guard elements of the Fulani/Beti hegemonic alliance that ruled over Cameroon during the Ahidjo years, but who were either persecuted or dumped overboard during the Biya years. They are led by the neo-conservatives (*libéraux-conservateurs*) of the UNDP.

3) The third and last bloc is the "*Courant Progressiste*" or CP (not to be confused with Sengat Kuo's party with the same name). This is the Progressive /leftist wing of the Cameroonian political scene led by the social-democrats of the SDF, and it includes the majority of parties and associations that once formed the "Union for Change" platform-- even though many of these parties, such as Hamani Bieuleu's UFDC, have since parted ways with the SDF. This bloc is built primarily around the "laissés pour comptes" or the orphans of the Ahidjo/Biya regimes. Its members are predominantly from the rebellious *Grand Ouest*.

The first two political currents, the CPDM-led FADC and the UNDP-led NDAR, are all part and parcel of the large Cameroonian conservative family on which the North/South axis or Beti/Foulbe alliance (the so-called "*Alliance hégémonique*") was based during the reign of Ahmadou Ahidjo. Brutally dismantled by the so-called "Beti Lobby" in the wake of the failed *Grand Nord*-led coup of April 1984, president Biya began reconstituting the alliance in 1992 in an attempt to neutralize the

hurricane from the *Grand Ouest*-- a reconstitution that has fully matured with the new Biya government.

While some of the members of this conservative bloc may flirt occasionally with the "hard-core" opposition of the *Grand Ouest* when it is in their interests, they are truly at home only within the various factions of this Cameroonian conservative family.

For example, when the Ayissi Mvondo came out of political retirement, he used the SDF platform--and not the UNDP's-- to gain nationwide acceptance as a true "opposant" in spite of his notorious past. However, during the 1997 legislative elections, the former Minister of State of the Ahidjo regime campaigned on behalf of the UNDP and not the SDF.

Similarly, even though her vociferous anti-Biya rhetoric was more in tune with the strident echoes of protest from the *Grand Ouest* than with the whimpers of anguish from the *Grand Nord*, it was only natural that Delphine Tsanga, another Ahidjo favorite, should ultimately throw in her lot with the UNDP and not with the SDF.

While it doesn't seem that obvious to many, Ndam Njoya and the UDC are also part of the conservative family-- albeit its most liberal member-- and have never been at ease when dealing with the SDF. It should be noted that Ndam Njoya and the UDC have never taken part in any of SDF-led political alliances (i.e., ARC-CNS, the Union for Change Alliance, or the FAC), that were created after the collapse of the National Coordination of Opposition Parties in 1991.

Ndam Njoya's strong personality and independent streak tend to mask the fact that his party is essentially another holdout for members of the neo-conservative bloc who never accepted Bello Bouba as a worthy heir to the Babatoura. Remember, for example, that even at the height of its popularity in Cameroon (1991), the UDC's honorary president was none other than El Hadj Moussa Yaya, Ahidjo's notorious henchman and king maker.

It should be pointed out also that the most prominent members of this party who have jumped ship since its creation have usually joined the UNDP or returned to the CPDM. This again is the case of Moussa Yaya who decamped to the CPDM on the eve of the 1992 presidential elections.

The reasons why Ndam Njoya has not permanently pitched his tent in the neo-conservative camp can be found in the complexities of local politics in the Noun division, and also in what some have called a messianic complex that makes Ndam Njoya (the theoretician of "*La Démocratie Responsabilisante*"), to believe that he (and not Bello Bouba) is the "right" one to lead the neo-conservative bloc.

The conservative camp's reach even crosses the Mungo to include many of the micro-parties that have sprouted (and usually withered) in Anglophone Cameroon, particularly in the South West province. This is the case of Dr. Agbor Bessong's CRP, or the now defunct LDP, of which the current National Assembly Vice President, Mr. Namata Ewanga, was a founding father back in 1991...

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, Cameroon's political axis revolves around three major ideological blocs, made up of two antagonistic and stable pillars (SDF/CPDM) and a fuzzy middle ground occupied by a number of parties that straddle both blocs-- by virtue of their being always prepared to cuddle with the CPDM or the SDF if it suits their interests. These parties, such as the UNDP, the MDR, certain UPC factions, and even the UDC, will continue to spring "surprises" on the Cameroonian public-- that is, as long as their actions are continuously (and erroneously) analyzed only within the opposition/CPDM context, and not from the progressive/conservative perspective which better explains past, present and future alliances, defections, and "betrayals" on the Cameroonian political scene.