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State Fragility and Power Alternation in the Central African Region: The Case of Cameroon.

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Abstract

The Central African region is replete with instances of fragility and vulnerabilities, ostensibly demonstrated by the number and frequency of political conflicts in most states. This is visibly seen during high stake political processes such as presidential elections where competing parties clash for the top job of the state- the Presidency. Cameroon is an example of a state in the region grappling with fragility which is mainly insecurity in many parts of the country. Since the 2018 presidential elections in Cameroon, the security landscape keeps degrading and simmering, coupled with rising socio-economic hardship due to inflation which places the country on tenterhooks. The issue at stake is that the multifaceted fragility of Cameroon is rarely analysed in relation to power alternation in Cameroon. The aim of this study is to analyse state fragility in Cameroon in the context of a likely power alternation at the supreme magistracy of the Republic of Cameroon. It employed a qualitative research strategy and a case study research design. Findings for the study were obtained via Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and desk research. Using thematic analysis, the study reveals two strands of thought on the research question. The first finding is that fragilities and vulnerabilities play out to the advantage of the incumbent to maintain the grip on power and the second finding reveals that the 2025 presidential elections in Cameroon portends a challenging political moment for the country which is at crossroads. It argues that Cameroonians should prepare to live a difficult political experience during and after October 2025 presidential elections.

Keywords: Elections, fragility, power alternation, political conflicts, supreme magistracy.

Introduction

The central African region in general is notorious for political instability, characterised by violent conflicts most especially intractable intra-state conflicts owing to power struggle, checkered democratisation, corruption, constitutional manipulation amongst

others. It has been described as a chaotic region in Africa¹. Moreover, sub-Saharan Africa is globally considered the most

¹ Kewir, J.K (2020) "Re-thinking regional security in central Africa: the case of the Central African Republic", Journal of

fragile region in the world². The persistence of political instability in the central African region has significant ramifications on state political processes and the capacity to deliver on political goods to their citizens³. In such a fragile context, critical state institutions are weakened such that their legality and legitimacy are called to question. In the same way, important political processes in the state such as elections are likely to be undermined and delegitimised and consequently state capacity and resilience are weakened. This is particularly preoccupying in countries going through difficult political transitions and power alternation at the helm of the state which is characteristic of the Central African region.

Since 2018, the political climate of Cameroon is charged with voices of and discourses on political transition and power alternation at the helm of the state. Peaceful power transition in Cameroon has been described as highly unlikely due to the issues on the ground. Some scholars have used the prevailing political climate in Cameroon, characterised by economic crisis, ethnic and linguistic divisions, corruption, and conflicts amongst others to describe it as a failed democracy⁴. The state in Cameroon has even been described by Eboko and Awondo (2018) as a stationary state⁵. This came on the heels of the 2018 Presidential elections when voices of power alternation to a Third Republic were louder. The scholars contend that political power in Cameroon confounds all attempts at prediction for three decades now. In 2025, Cameroonians will go to the polls for Presidential elections. The voices of power alternation are loudest now as opposition parties, civil society organisations and even the church are calling for massive voter registration⁶.

According to reputable sources, Cameroon is a fragile state even though the public, especially political stakeholders are not unanimous about it. People hostile to the Biya regime consider Cameroon as a tinderbox waiting for a spark whereas those sympathetic to the regime argue that Cameroon is resilient to overcome centripetal forces⁷. The Crisis Group Report posited that Cameroon is a classic example of a fragile state on account of the following: weak institutions, low political participation of the population in the political process, very problematic selection of elites and little functioning oversight of government⁸. Another indicator identified to qualify the fragile nature of Cameroon is legitimacy deficit of the Biya regime which is not widely seen as

African Renaissance Studies-Multi, inter and Trans disciplinary, 15:2, pp 115-133.

² Heofler, A (2019) "Fragility and development in Africa : an introduction review of development economics" Vol. 23, Issue 3

Mc Kay, A & Thornbecke, E (2019) "The anatomy of fragile states in sub-Saharan Africa : review of development economics

Chuku, C & Onye, K (2019) "The macroeconomics of state fragility in Africa ". Working Paper Series no. 307, African Development Bank Group.

³ Moe, LW (2010) " Addressing state fragility in Africa : a need to challenge established "windows"?", FIIA Report

⁴ Dicklitch, S (2002) " Failed democratic transition in Cameroon: a human rights explanation" Human Rights Quarterly

⁵ Eboko, E & Awondo, P (2018) " The Stationary state: between chaos and rebirth" editions Karthala-Politique Africaine

⁶ Cameroon News Agency (2024) *Cameroon: Catholic Bishops call for massive voter registration ahead of 2025 elections*

⁷ International Crisis Group (2010) *Cameroon: fragile state? Africa Report no. 160*

⁸ Ibid

representative of the national aspirations but as a collection of private interests⁹.

It is evident that factors of fragility common in the Central African region are manifested in Cameroon, the hegemon in the Economic Community of Central African states (ECCAS) on some measures such as its geostrategic position in the Gulf of Guinea. According to the 2023 Fragile States index, Cameroon scored 94 in the index which falls within the Lowest Best (LB). The general trend from 2009 to 2023 has been that of increase in fragility. It scored 94.3 and ranked 20th on the Fragile State Index indicating a 0.3 increase from the previous ranking in 2023¹⁰. The worrying trend is that this worsening state capacity and resilience is occurring in a particular context when the quest for power alternation to a Third Republic in Cameroon is high, indicated by calls from the civil society for massive enrolment on the electoral register against the 2025 Presidential scrutiny. The pertinent question is: Is the state of Cameroon capable to ensure a smooth power transition with the current state of fragility?

The main aim of this article is to analyse state fragility in Cameroon in the context of the prospects for power transition at the helm of the state. It employed a qualitative research strategy to analyse state fragility in the Central African region and how it connects with power alternation at the helm of the state using the case study of Cameroon. The main instrument of primary data collection used was Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) from leaders and militants of political parties, civil society organisations and academic. This was supplemented by secondary data sources obtained via desk research. The study argues that the fragile state perception of Cameroon portends a difficult and challenging political context for power alternation in the 2025 Presidential elections in a period where mobilisation for massive enrolment on the electoral register and calls for power transition by the civil society are at aeronautic highs.

This article is structured into three parts. The first part analyses instances of state fragility, focusing on the Central African region and Cameroon in particular. The second part analyses state fragility in Cameroon in connection with power alternation with emphasis on constitutional and peaceful transition. The conclusion discusses the findings and end with recommendations based on what the study reveals.

Instances of state fragility in Cameroon.

The political landscape of Cameroon is replete with fragility having national and regional reverberation. They range from ethnic and clan-based politics, a separatist insurgency in the Anglophone regions, Islamic terrorist incursions in the Northern regions and transnational insecurity in the Eastern borders of the country. These vulnerabilities amplify the political tension which characterise the context of Cameroon which is poised for a transition to a Third Republic. The subsequent subsections analyses these vulnerabilities and their implication for power alternation in Cameroon.

a. Ethnic and clan-based politics in Cameroon.

The role of ethnicity in shaping politics in Cameroon has been emphasised by many scholars. Often considered as Africa in miniature, Cameroon has over 240 different tribes, sandwiched

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Fund for Peace. (2024). *Fragile States Index*. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

across three main ethnic groups viz: Bantus, Semi-bantus and Sudanese¹¹. This ethnic diversity has been at the centre of political processes and activities of the state. While the diversity itself is not problematic, the use of it by political actors is endemic in the political evolution of the post-colonial state in Cameroon. The main argument by most scholars in this conceptual framework is the view that the ethnic diversity of Cameroon has been politicised. To some proponents, ethnicity is a tool in the hands of political entrepreneurs to further their narrow political interests¹² and the accumulation of political goods¹³. This tendency is often acute during elections such as legislative, parliamentary and most especially presidential scrutines when the electorate is divided along ethnic lines and vote in the same. In extreme cases, violent and open confrontation often sets in, exacerbated by hate speech as demonstrated in the 2018 Presidential elections¹⁴.

The foregoing paints a picture of fragility and vulnerability inherent in the political landscape of Cameroon. It is indicative that during high stake political exigencies such as elections, social fractionalisation amongst Cameroonians along ethnic lines heightens. It is however also an indicator that it is deliberately engineered by political actors for their interests at the detriment of the citizens which is antithetical to social cohesion. This trend may be more worrisome during the 2025 Presidential election which is anticipated to be the most decisive period of power alternation in contemporary Cameroon history.

b. The separatist movement in Anglophone Cameroon.

Post-colonial Cameroon is faced with a separatist insurgency which have engulfed the North West and South West regions of the country since 2017. The separatist insurgency emanated from a poorly managed grievance owing to the legal and education identity of Anglophones. The government's heavy-handed response to the demands from corporatist bodies escalated into an armed conflict with separatists attacking military installations and personnel of the state demanding for the independence of a state they call "Ambazonia". For seven years now, over 6000 people have been killed in the two Anglophone regions with hundreds of thousands internally displaced and hundreds of refugees in Nigeria¹⁵. All efforts to facilitate a peace settlement has flowed and ebbed without gaining significant traction with the latest being the Canadian-led process, aborted by the government of Cameroon¹⁶.

¹¹ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. (n.d.). *BSLA Cmeroun ABADCAM*. <https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/alp/BSLA/bsla-helsinki-presentations/138-Garga-Shafack-Cameroon-BSLA.pdf>

¹² Monga, Y. (2000). Au village! : Space, culture and politics in Cameroon. *Cahier D`etudes Africaines*, 160(XL-4), 723-749. <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/46?file=1>

¹³ Vubo, Y. E. (2006). Management of ethnic diversity in Cameroon against the backdrop of social crisis. *Cahier D`etudes Africaines*, 181, 135-156. <file:///C:/Users/cedri/Downloads/etudesafricaines-15159.pdf>

¹⁴ International Crisis Group. (2020). *Easing Cameroon's ethno-political tensions, on and offline* (295; Africa Report, pp. 1-46). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/295-easing-camerouns-ethno-political-tensions.pdf>

¹⁵ International Crisis Group. (2019). *A second look at Cameroon's Anglophone special status* (Cameroon 188). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/b188-second-look-camerouns-anglophone-special-status>

¹⁶ Ibid

The separatist insurgency in Anglophone Cameroon often escalates in violence during significant high stake political events in the country such as Youth Day, National Day and elections. The latter was particularly glaring during the 2018 presidential elections. In the lead up to the 2018 presidential elections, thousands fled the North West and South West regions, fearing an escalation in attacks between the separatists and the national army¹⁷. Separatist banned elections in the Anglophone regions by targeting potential voters and candidates, according credible human rights bodies such as Human Rights Watch, separatists kidnapped persons, burnt and destroyed houses and elections materials in the Anglophone regions in the build up to the elections and elections day proper¹⁸. With the re-election of Paul Biya for the seventh mandate, prospects that power alternation may facilitate a peace settlement in the Anglophones regions became slim as it further emboldened the resolve of the secessionists. With the 2025 presidential scrutiny drawing closer, a critical analysis is imperative given that the political landscape of Cameroon is tenser than in 2018 vis-à-vis power alternation at the supreme magistracy of the state.

c. The Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Cameroon.

The terrorist incursion in the Northern region of Cameroon from the Islamic sect, Boko haram is another major insecurity contention that informs state fragility in Cameroon. The Far north region in particular is grabbing with an inter-communal conflict pitting Choa Arab herders against Musgum fisherfolk. This conflict has killed hundreds and displaced tens of thousand¹⁹. Coupled with the general insecurity due to the Boko haram insurgency further heightens fragility. However, the root causes of insecurity in the Far North region of Cameroon have been linked to the structural problems which have created fertile grounds for them to fester and blossom. Such structural deficits include: abject poverty (the poorest region in Cameroon), historical neglect and weak national integration into the post-colonial state by the government of Cameroon²⁰. The poverty rate of the Northern region was estimated at 74.3% as compared to 37.5% which is the national average²¹. This is indicative of the fact that the political landscape of Cameroon is one charged with a multiplicity of challenges which

¹⁷ ACAPS. (2018). *Cameroon: Electoral violence in Anglophone regions* (pp. 1-4) [Risk Report]. https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20180920_acaps_risk_report_electoral_violence_anglophone_crisis_cameroon_0.pdf

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2020). *Cameroon: Election violence in Anglophone regions, investigate abuses, ensure justice*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/12/cameroon-election-violence-anglophone-regions>

¹⁹ International Crisis Group. (2024). *Curbing feuds over water in Cameroon's Far north* (Briefing 194). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/b197-curbing-feuds-over-water-camerouns-far-north>

²⁰ International Crisis Group. (2016). *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram* (Africa 241). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroon-confronting-boko-haram>

²¹ Government of Cameroon. (n.d.). *Recovery for peace consolidation strategy for Northern and East Cameroon 2018-2022*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/245081527486919288/pdf/126613-WP-P160779-PUBLIC-cameroon-RPC-english-web-DISCLAIMER.pdf>

may impact prospects for a smooth power alternation at the helm of the State.

d. Insecurity in the Eastern region of Cameroon

The Eastern region of Cameroon is grappling with two major insecurity challenges which include a natural resource conflict and trans-border criminality from the Central African Republic. The former concerns conflict between Artisanal and Small-scale Mining companies (ASM), mostly Chinese and local inhabitants over the exploitation of gold in Batere` Oya, in East Cameroon. The mining sector in this region is fraught with corruption and consequently conflict²². The conflict between Chinese expatriates and local artisanal miners over the exploitation of gold often result to casualties and even death of locals²³. The latter is the fall-out of insecurity in the neighbouring Central African Republic which has been experiencing a civil war since 2013. The mass influx of refugees from the Central African Republic into the eastern region of Cameroon has led to pressures on the host communities such as food insecurity as the region is host to over 270,000 refugees. This has occasioned tension between host communities and refugees over access to natural resources and basic social services²⁴. Thus, the situation in the eastern region adds to the thick layers of fragility that underpins the political landscape of Cameroon.

The implication of state fragility on power alternation in Cameroon

Data obtained from the field leads to two emerging themes on the connection between state fragility and prospects for power alternation in Cameroon in 2025. This is grouped according to the most recurrent ideas from their perspectives. In other words, there are two schools of thought that emerged from the field. The first school posit that state fragility in Cameroon has little or no bearing on power alternation at the helm of the state. The second and last school espouses that the fragile political landscape of contemporary Cameroon offers prospects for a challenging power alternation in 2025.

The first school of thought argues that state fragility and vulnerability in the context of power alternation in the Central African Region in general and Cameroon more precisely only helps to strengthen the grip on power by the incumbent and that elections are just routine activities with no prospects for power alternation. According to this reasoning, elections are opportunities for incumbents to extend their grip on political power and this is particularly usual in contexts of crises and vulnerabilities. In an

²² Weng, L., & Margules, C. (2022). Challenges with formalizing artisanal and small-scale mining in Cameroon: Understanding the role of Chinese actors. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 9, 101046. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2022.101046>

²³ Locka, C. (2018). *Chinese miners invade Cameroon, exploiting gold without authorization and cause death* (Special Reports) [Corruption, Human rights violation]. The Muse Project. <https://www.themusebaproject.org/special-reports/chinese-miners-invade-cameroon-exploiting-gold-without-authorization-and-causing-deaths/>

²⁴ Development Initiatives. (2020). *Supporting longer term development in crises at the nexus: Lessons from Cameroon*. <https://devinit.org/resources/supporting-longer-term-development-crisis-nexus-lessons-cameroon/crisis-context/>

interview with an academic and civil society actor in Cameroon, he had this to say:

We have had presidential elections since the Boko Haram insurgency in the North.....we have had elections in Chad, Nigeria and Cameroon and the difference between Nigeria, on the one hand and Cameroon and Chad on the other hand is, while in Nigeria presidential elections have been witnessing power alternation, in Cameroon and Chad, presidential elections have been keeping the incumbent in place. So, the conflicts or vulnerabilities you have mentioned have little or nothing to do with the 2025 elections in Cameroon since those who benefit from these elections seem to care less on the conflicts destroying lives of the people they are meant to govern, and govern well.

The above thesis is bolstered by the argument that in fragile contexts such as armed conflicts like in the case of the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, fragility benefits the incumbent who uses it to consolidate the grip at the helm of the state. This is due to the fact that voters in the conflict-hit regions especially in the peripheries are not able to vote owing to insecurity characterised by intimidation, kidnappings and killings by separatists of persons daring to vote. In such atmosphere, electoral malpractices easily fester. Even the few who succeed to vote are not assured of transparency due to insecurity. It is even more difficult for the opposition to monitor elections. The situation is different for the incumbent as it finds it favourable.

Cameroon as a result of instability will find it very difficult to have the usage of the term universal suffrage being implemented to its latter. This is because...there are thousands of Cameroonians in conflict-hit zones especially in the peripheries of these conflict areas that won't be able to really perform their civic rights which is the right to vote simply because in these parts of the country, it is a heroic movement to be able to break through and partake in such elections (Civil Society Leader, 2024).

The volatile security situation of Cameroon can create fear among citizens. For instance, when we take the situation of the North West and South West regions we discover that the population is already in fear. Again, such elections periods in these regions are often characterised by "Ghost Towns" which hamper the elections. Also, it will hinder the distribution of elections materials in these local communities given that they will be threats and intimidation from the separatists...(Academic and civil society actor, 2024).

The second school of thought expounds that the 2025 presidential elections has the tendency of exacerbating state fragility and vulnerability in Cameroon. The main thesis is that the actions of government officials in the build up to the electoral year indicate irresponsiveness to thesis of power alternation at the helm of the state. These actions of political actors are interpreted to mean that the current political order is not prepared to accommodate power alternation at the helm of the state. Such actions include frequent conflicts between state officials and opposition political parties and civil society organisations. Some argue that though Cameroonians are ready for power alternation, the government is not.

To me, No! the government is not ready for power alternation. This is backed by the 2008 constitution when mandate limitation clause was removed. Secondly, the threats by the Minister of Territorial Administration, the Divisional Officers drowning attempts for any Cameroonian who dares express a critical view on the institutions of Cameroon and its occupants. So, we find a “de-democratisation” efforts or “reverse democratisation” efforts being engineered from top, particularly by those who are strongly tied to the incumbent (Civil Society and academic, 2024).

From a party politics perspective, you will discover that there is that tendency in which the ruling party that has leverage more than every other political party in Cameroon in all the ten regions of the country is not yet ready to give room for issues related to political transition. This is seen in the actions of party barons who continue to send in motions of support for their natural candidate who is the incumbent, soliciting him to stand for the 2025 presidential elections. As a matter of fact, the ruling elite is not yet psychologically prepared for power alternation as seen in their manoeuvres to perpetuate in power (Civil society activist, 2024).

Conclusion

The Central African region has been grappling with acute political crises relating to power alternation since political independence. Little or no record exists to argue for smooth and peaceful transitions at the helm of the state in this region. What is common in this region is the tendency of the incumbent to tweak the constitution in order to perpetuate their stay in power. Another alternative is the use of political compromise or backstage negotiations to effect power alternation. The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo quickly comes to mind. In extreme scenarios, the military has often intervened to seize power from the incumbent such as the case of Gabon in 2023. Repression of opposition forces and political victimisation characterise the political atmosphere in this region. Moreover, elections in this region are more of a routine than substantive activity with no real consequence. It has the world's longest serving leaders since independence. Hence, the quest for power alternation is rife and much desired by the citizenry.

Cameroon has known just two presidents since independence in 1960. The incumbent has been ruling since 1982. Since political liberalisation in Cameroon in the 90s, the political landscape of Cameroon has witnessed a proliferation of opposition political parties to challenge the ruling political party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). The latter has been able to consolidate itself in power especially after the 1984 abortive coup d'état which is alleged to have been masterminded the aids and loyalists of the former president, El Haj Ahmadou Ahidjo, first president of the Republic. Socio-economic hardship, crises and conflicts in Cameroon have pushed the civil society and opposition political parties to advocate for power alternation at the helm of the state. This call is particularly resounding in the build up to the 2025 presidential elections which is characterised by massive enrolment on the voters register.

As a common thread in the Central African region, two speculations are rife to explain the prospects for political transition in Cameroon in the midst of fragility and vulnerability. The first

hypothesis posits that state fragility does not significantly impact elections in Cameroon. On the contrary, fragility serves as fertile ground for the incumbent to maintain his stay in power. In this context, insecurity impedes smooth elections and heightens the cost of organising free and transparent elections. Secondly, it is speculated that the 2025 presidential elections will likely exacerbate existing fragility and vulnerability and the quest for power alternation is gaining traction. A clear indication is the action of government officials aimed at intimidating opposition political parties and civil society activism. Thus, it is feared that 2025 may portend a complex political crisis for Cameroon. For this reason, Cameroonians should be prepared for a challenging electoral year in 2025.

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