

Cameroon's Political Succession Schism of 1983 Revisited

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Abstract

When in November 1982 President Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon peacefully stepped down and handed over the Presidency of the United Republic to his personally designated successor Paul Biya, his decision was greeted with great fanfare in Africa and the world. Less than six months into what seemed like a dynastic succession relations between the outgoing president who retained the chairmanship of the monolithic Cameroon National Union (CNU) party and the new president instantly soured. Beneath the souring of their two-decade long political relationship was a struggle for power. In Ahidjo's Cameroon the CNU was superior to the state. Ahidjo must have thought that he could retain some form of authority, as chairman of the CNU party, over his protégé and handpicked successor. But Biya would have none of that. In as much as the ensuing struggle for power appeared on the surface as personal between Ahidjo and Biya, it also had a tribal dimension, an antecedent, dating back to 1958 when Ahidjo replaced André Marie Mbida as prime minister of French Cameroun. This essay attempts to unravel and explain, from a broader historical perspective, the complexities attendant to the succession crisis of 1983 that nearly plunged the country into civil war. To that end, it combines among other factors the key variables of French political machinations in Cameroon, l'affaire Mbida of 1958, and the role of tribalism in Cameroon politics.

Keywords: Ahidjo; Biya; Political Succession; Cameroon Politics; Mbida; Aujoulat

1. Introduction

Until November 6, 1982, the powers of the Cameroon State and single political party of the country were concentrated in the hands of one man: Ahmadou Ahidjo. As President of the United Republic of Cameroon and Chairman of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) Ahidjo was the most powerful man in the country, presiding over a political system he had personally fashioned. But he suddenly took what appeared many of his countrymen as precipitous decision on November 4, 1982, which resulted two days later in his relinquishing the office of president (Takougang, 1997: p. 163) to his Prime Minister, Paul Biya, while retaining the chairmanship of the CNU party (*Africa Diary*,: 1983, 1). This architect of the modern Cameroonian polity had hoped to exercise continued control over his protégé from his post of party chairman (*Cameroon Post*, 1989: p. 1). But the vicissitudes of Cameroon's political history that had catapulted Ahidjo to the helm of power some 24 years in 1958 unraveled what was supposed to be the master's grandest political gamble of all time.

2. Appointing and Not Electing a Successor

On November 2, 1982, President Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon suddenly decided to step down from power. The manner in which Ahidjo exited power was as sudden and dramatic as his decision. Both took many of his countrymen by surprise. On Thursday, November 4, at 8:23 p.m. Ahidjo announced his decision to a

stunned Cameroonian people over Radio Cameroon:

Fellow Cameroonians, my dear countrymen, I have decided to resign my duties as Head of State of the United Republic of Cameroon... I request all of you Cameroonians to give your full confidence and whole-hearted support to my constitutional heir, Mr. Paul Biya. He merits the confidence of all, both at home and abroad (Ngoh, 1987: p. 300).

This announcement was staggering to the Cameroonian citizenry that had known only one president since reunification in 1961, and many wondered why. Some light has been shed on why Ahidjo resigned and how he selected Paul Biya to succeed him by the first president's widow, Germaine Ahidjo (www.bonaberi.com/article.php?aid=3154). In an interview with *3a Télé Sud*'s Michel Biongolon May 30, 2007 during the program *Entre Nous*, Mrs. Ahidjo divulged that in the waning days of her husband's rule he had suffered acute and recurrent headaches that caused him memory loss. These headaches, according to Germaine Ahidjo, resulted from President Ahidjo overworking himself intellectually by striving to read all the dossiers pertaining to his duties as head of state.

Although Ahidjo's doctor had advised him to take a month-long vacation from his pressing duties, after long and careful consideration of his doctors' prescription, the president decided to go farther than where the doctors had prescribed. Ahidjo decided to relinquish power rather than take a month-long leave-of-absence from his pressing duties. But how to execute this decision became a vexing problem that probably caused Ahidjo even more severe headaches, especially because the Machiavellian in him was scheming to remain in power by subterfuge.

According to Mrs. Ahidjo, two options were open to her husband: to either resign the presidency for someone else to shoulder the responsibility of administering the state; or declare the presidency vacant and allow for elections to be conducted by an interim successor within 40 days. But Ahidjo feared that either strategy might unleash undesirable consequences, such as a ferocious struggle for succession. Consequently, in his bid to thwart such an eventuality, Ahidjo amended the Constitution of the United Republic of Cameroon, which provided for the President of the National Assembly to succeed him in the event of an incapacity or death, in order for the Prime Minister to be his constitutional successor.

Ahidjo was a man of power not accustomed to leaving things political to chance. He probably thought that he loved his country more than all other Cameroonians, and, pursuant to that sentiment, Ahidjo projected himself as the sole determinant of the political destiny of his beloved country. As principal architect of the Cameroon state, he did not trust fellow Cameroonians to handle even simple matters like democratically electing his successor. Habituated to exercising absolute power during the past quarter century and trusting none other but his own political acumen, Ahidjo decided to micro-manage his own succession. However, by adhering to a strange authoritarian political logic, Ahidjo inadvertently orchestrated his own political demise.

Germaine Ahidjo revealed that her husband had three candidates—all longtime aides of the president—to choose a successor from. These were Victor Ayissi Mvodo, the powerful Minister of Territorial Administration; Samuel Eboua, Secretary General at the Presidency; and Paul Biya, the Prime Minister. President Ahidjo who had devoted his life to the service of Cameroon since he was 23 years old and saw himself as a man above tribalism. He employed this same criterion of evaluation in the process of selecting his possible successor. First, he considered Ayissi Mvodo, then Samuel Eboua. Although both men were hard-working, Ahidjo found them to be tribalistic, which summarily disqualified them to lead Cameroon. Having decided to eliminate Ayissi Mvodo and Eboua, Ahidjo finally settled for Paul Biya—a self-effacing bureaucrat who executed his duties meticulously and skillfully desisted from engaging in bureaucratic squabbles. Biya possessed qualities that Ahidjo admired: he was young, bilingual, and politically untainted.

3. Politics of Tribalism

Germaine Ahidjo's portrayal of her deceased husband presents a picture of Ahidjo as a man who was above tribalism. That may well have been Germaine's personal estimation of her husband, but the then extant political realities contradict her testimony. Ahidjo was a politician who practiced his craft in a multiethnic polity and adeptly used his regional base in North Cameroon to enhance his hegemony at the center of power in Yaoundé. A 2003 study by scholars at the University of Antwerp's Institute for Development Policy & Management indicates that in North Cameroon where Ahidjo hailed, Muslims dominated the non-Muslims in the region. The non-Muslim *Mafa* or "kirdi" (literally: heretics), as they were called by the established Muslim community, were systematically subordinated to the Muslims.

Given the fact that Ahidjo's political weight depended on the group he represented, the president was careful to present the whole Northern Province of the country as Muslim. In this way, millions of non-Muslim *Mafa* who inhabited the Mandara Mountains saw their opportunities restricted by the dominant Muslim society that was able to profit from the national state structure. In fact, the Ahidjo regime prohibited the mountain-dwelling *Mafa* from freely circulating in the South. The *Mafa* were never to travel beyond their locale and those who dared to violate this restriction were arrested and sent back home. This restriction of the non-Muslim *Mafa* permitted the center of power to present the northern part of Cameroon, which constituted a third of the country, as entirely Muslim. Consequently, the only avenue open to the *Mafa* toward accessing available opportunities became conversion to Islam. Conversion became so rampant that during the Ahidjo era almost 90 percent of all administrative positions in northern Cameroon were occupied by people with Muslim names.

The Muslim hegemony in North Cameroon that was fashioned by Ahidjo crumbled at the end of his reign. When President Paul Biya, a Christian southerner, rose to power in 1982 the "kirdi" became allies of the ruling party, and thus they positioned themselves against the Muslim opposition. In response to the new realities that called for a realignment of political forces in the North, the Biya regime opened up new political space for the formerly subordinated non-Muslim *Mafa*. This opening took the form of dividing up the huge North Province in 1983 into three (Adamawa, North, and Far North) provinces and giving the Far North Province to the *Mafa*. This assignment of political space elicited a variety of responses from the *Mafa*, which ranged from a spectacular change of the types of names administrators' adopted—no longer Muslim but Christian and other native names—to withdrawal from Islam. The local *lamido* of Moskotà, for example, symbolized the latter change. He had converted to Islam only at the end of the 1960s undoubtedly in response to the political pressures of that time. No sooner had Biya provided him political space than he closed the local mosque and converted it into a stable for donkeys (Bastiaansen, Herdt, & D'Exelle, 2003).

It should be made abundantly clear that no Cameroonian politician is above tribalism. A tribe or ethnic groups is, like kinship, an extension of the family in most tribal societies. Unless born outside of one's ethnic locale, most of the people political leaders encounter, befriend, and form strong cultural bonds during their childhood and adolescent years are largely members of their ethnic groups. Although some political leaders are likely to have some friends who belong to other ethnic groups, these are often few and never constitute a constituency from which to draw support in times of political crises.

The only Cameroonians who probably rose above tribalism were the leaders of the UPC and other opposition leaders. But we cannot judge them with any degree of certainty because they never assumed the reins of power and thus never ruled the country. As will be shown later, President Biya who was selected by Ahidjo because he was perceived as non-tribalistic would in his moment of need summon his tribesmen to his defense. Empirical evidence suggest that in societies in which tribal affiliation is the organizing principle in national politics, and this is true for contemporary Cameroon, tribalism is not only political destiny but, more

importantly, a precondition for assuming and retaining political power.

4. A Case of Opposing Political Visions

Ahidjo's vision for Cameroon was diametrically opposite to Biya's. This dichotomy of visions was subsequently brought to the forefront of national politics with the passing of time. The collision of their visions ultimately led to a struggle for supremacy between the two men, expressed by their quest for primacy of the political institution that each man presided over. It soon became obvious that something had gone wrong in both the conception and execution of Ahidjo's great strategy for retaining the preeminent position in the Cameroon power structure. For a division of power between two men presiding over two competing institutions could not but be wobbly, unless their visions for the country were congruent. But congruent the visions of Ahidjo and Biya were not, even though the latter had projected such an impression for a very long time until the reins of power were handed over to him in a silver platter.

As the elderly statesman, Ahidjo must have entertained the idea of remaining the supreme ruler of Cameroon, at least for a while. This is not entirely far-fetched, especially in a country where age plays a significant role in social and political relationships. Custom and tradition aside, this hypothesis is supported by a provision in the constitution of the CNU party that clearly stipulated the supremacy of the party over all political organizations, including the state. That provision presented the CNU party as constituting "a preeminent forum from which shall be elaborated the general political guidelines and the programme of action to be proposed to the government for the attainment of National Unity, which is necessary for the well-being of all (Cameroon National Union, n.d.: p. 11).

As long as Ahidjo was chief of state and party chairman, this provision was strictly adhered to. But no sooner had he given up leadership of one of the two preeminent political institutions of the country than a contest for primacy ensued between him and his hand-picked successor. As rumors of an unbridgeable split between the old and new presidents began to filter into the open, Ahidjo turned to that party-line in January 1983 to allay the rumors.

4.1. Rumors and Realities

In late-January, barely two months after he relinquished the office of president and following the rumors of a power skirmish between him and President Biya, Ahidjo gave an interview to the government-owned newspaper, *Cameroon Tribune*, in which the CNU party chairman enunciated his view of the relationship between the party and government. Ahidjo had asserted unambiguously and with confidence the supremacy of the party over the state by noting that "the party defines the guidelines of the nation's policy. The government implements this policy...." (*Cameroon Tribune*, 1983a: p.1).

Although Ahidjo's candid pronouncement in early 1983 was in keeping with the politics of the "Old Order", it nonetheless contributed to the rupturing of his relationship with Biya, which dated as far back to 1962. Obviously, the new president did not wish to remain perpetually in the shadow of his mentor. And so the news of their power tussle, which centered on a contention for primacy between the state and the party, reached the public through what Professor Le Vine characterized as the leaky "back stairs of Cameroon's presidential palace" (Le Vine, 1983: p. 22).

Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon, is one of those capital cities of the world where political secrets are seldom kept secret. This is especially pronounced with stories emanating from the Presidential Palace that involve personalities. No sooner are the "secrets" discussed in the citadel of power than employees in the Presidency bring some juicy "tit-bits" to the neighborhoods of Yaoundé, from where they spread

throughout the country like wild fire. Hence fact and rumor tend to carry equal weight. These rumors are usually linked to power struggles between political leaders whose greatest weakness is their inability or unwillingness to share power. This attitude is perhaps explained by the fact that some African leaders are uncertain of their legitimacy. Having been placed in power not by the people whom they govern but by foreign powers, they often tend to see themselves as illegitimate in the African context of political legitimacy.

As the Yaoundé rumors began to gain currency in early 1983, both the president (Biya) and party chairman (Ahidjo) vigorously sought to dismiss them as unfounded. But as the cleavage between them widened, however, President Biya took to playing on the people's fears by stressing the prospect of the political domination of a single ethnic group. Accordingly, what was supposed to be a smooth political succession gradually sunk into a nightmare. What were the factors that contributed to this political fallout in Cameroon? Were the rumors being leaked by President Biya's camp in order to undermine Chairman Ahidjo? In the political climate of 1983, rife with unprecedented maneuverings for power, with Biya presenting himself as champion of the liberties that Ahidjo had denied Cameroonians for the past twenty-four years, very few Cameroonians gave serious thought as to the possibility that their new president was capable of political machinations. President Biya was clean, while Ahidjo was tainted. In vain did Ahidjo try to explain himself to the people whom he had governed with an iron fist for over two decades. The tide of political change was clearly against the ostensibly sickly dictator, and his fate, perhaps an example of what awaits many an African dictator who overstays his welcome to power.

In January 1983, Ahidjo had pleaded his case by asserting that "if for one reason or the other, I did not want Mr. Biya to become President, I could have, on my resignation, terminated his function as Prime Minister and replaced him. If I did not do it, it means that he has my confidence and I wished to see him succeed me pursuant to the Nation's Constitution" (*Cameroon Tribune*, 1983a: p. 3). But Ahidjo's entreaties fell on deaf ears and the political pendulum swung to the favor of Biya, who instantly became the man of the day with all the answers and all the promises, even though they were mere expedients. That Cameroonians failed to listen to Ahidjo at that critical juncture in the political life of their country attests not solely to their political gullibility but also indicative of the fact that many Cameroonians were glad to see Grand Comrade Ahidjo disappear from the political stage.

5. The Eclipse of Ahidjo

Biya thus emerged victorious in the succession crisis of 1983 by telling the Cameroonian people exactly what they wanted to hear. During his first tour of the nation as president, Biya visited Ahidjo's home base in the North. He told the people that "the most sectarian of our countrymen are the least aware of the fact that no one tribe can claim that it has been called upon to dominate the others, nor can anyone tribe claim to be vested with any legitimacy whatever to govern the others" (*Cameroon Tribune*, 1983b: p. 4). To the acute observers of Cameroon politics, the statements of Ahidjo and Biya were not only opposed but were also evocative of the passing of an old order and the emergence of a new one. The statements also heralded a transition of power: the eclipse of Ahmadou Ahidjo and the rise of Paul Biya. Beyond this cosmetic change of personalities at the top of the political hierarchy that was accompanied by some degree of liberalization of freedom of expression, very little of substance changed in Cameroon. Many Cameroonians were disappointed in President Biya because, immediately after discharging his adversary, he began practicing exactly what he had preached against Ahidjo during their struggle for primacy.

By the end of July 1983, two alleged assassination attempts on President Biya's life were reported (*West Africa*, 1983a: p. 1740). At the time former president Ahidjo had left the country and was on exile in France,

where he announced his resignation as chairman of the CNU party the following month (*West Africa*: 1983b, 2049). Whether the allegations of assassination attempts were factual or fictive remain a big question. Nevertheless, the unsuccessful attempts on Biya's life culminated with the abortive *coup d'état* of April 6-7, 1984 (*Cameroon Tribune*, 1984c: p. 1). These disturbing events in the relatively calm history of the United Republic of Cameroon cast a shadow of doubt over Ahidjo. Even though the ex-president assiduously denied having played any role in them, and a party apparatchik François Sengat-Kuoh would later challenge Biya to prove Ahidjo's culpability (*Le Messenger*, 1991: pp. 1 and 13) the stories won a groundswell of national support for President Biya.

5.1. Appeal to Traditional Power Structure

In a strategic move to consolidate power, President Biya began courting the traditional power structures of Cameroon. The best publicized and perhaps most significant was his success with the powerful traditional of the then North West Province (now North West Region). Unclear is how the negotiations took place. But the result was palpable. Unprecedented in the political history of Cameroon, the traditional leaders of the centralized chiefdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields, known as the *Afon*, assembled and crowned President Biya "Fon of Fons" in recognition of what the fons said was "the efficient manner in which he is leading the affairs of state" (*Cameroon Tribune*, 1984b: p. 1).

This action of the fons of Bamenda attested to the prevailing climate of politics in Cameroon in the early-1980s, with individuals and groups jockeying for position and power in the post-Ahidjo era. It was obvious to political observers that the fons did not move to confer traditional honors on the President from any direct or intimate knowledge of Biya; and that they did so in order to win favor with the new president. Furthermore, the title of "Fon" is ascriptive, heritable, and a life-time political office; that of president is elective in Cameroon and temporal. By conferring upon Biya the title of "Fon of Fons," by submitting themselves to the new president, the grassfield chiefs who are themselves chiefs-for-life were expressing their desire to see Biya remain "president-for-life". Their action was a great political coup for themselves and their region but a disservice to the nation and the cause of democracy in Cameroon. A brief discussion of the fons of the Bamenda Grassfields would place their action in proper perspective and illuminate their political motivation.

The North West Province of Cameroon, also known as the Bamenda Grassfields, is comprised of over one hundred chiefdoms. Each of these chiefdoms (or fondoms) is ruled by a Fon whose subjects consider him to be a divine king. The chiefdoms, a pre-colonial form of governance, were kept in place during colonial rule and then after independence because they provided a ready-made system of local government. Today, the chiefdoms form essentially tribal states within the nation and the fons continue to be important political actors and spiritual leaders.

Cameroon has three legal systems reflecting both its indigenous and inherited colonial cultures. Common law, statutory law, and customary law are all recognized in Cameroon. The Fons, who are paid by the government and act as civil servants, govern their chiefdoms according to customary laws. Fons act as justices of the peace, presiding over civil and cultural matters, such as land disputes and domestic matters. They may establish practices enforceable in their fondoms (what do you mean practices?). Each Fon is assisted by a council, known as elders or notables, and has his own police force, known as the *kwifons*. Local administrative officials oversee those aspects of administration falling outside the responsibilities of the Fon (such as taxation, civil marriages, education, infrastructure [roads and bridges] and economic development, etc.? Could you elaborate so I can give more examples of some of those responsibilities). The State rarely intervenes in matters of the Fondom.

Fons are also important spiritual leaders, responsible for, among other things, maintaining peace and the fertility of land. The Fons are no mere mortals; they are considered to be divine beings with ties to the ancestors and supernatural powers. As such, they are both deeply revered and feared by their subjects whose loyalty they command with little effort. The approximate analogy of the kind of power the Fons wield is that of the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt. Although Fons govern only their respective chiefdoms, their reach can be quite extensive through networks of power relations. Fons have ties both to other fons and to the central government. They meet with each other periodically as a Council of Fons and the national government often consults with them before it appoints local government officials. Moreover, some Fons are themselves members of the government, serving in the parliament and the ruling Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Party (CPDM), etc. Politically, the grassfieldfons are very powerful. They make for good and desirable allies that can deliver the vote. The significance of their action crowning President as "Fon of Fons" rests primarily on their desire to self-preserve and to validate their traditional prerogatives.

Notwithstanding the conferring on President Biya the title of "Fon of Fons" by the *Afon*, the weight of Biya's support in the country was overwhelming. It was so heavy that when in the course of 1984 a French newspaper, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, carried a story in which it alleged that the president had bought real estate in France and associated the purchase with expropriation of public funds, the local press came to Biya's rescue. Similarly, the people stood by their president against the claims of Amnesty International that Biya was executing people without proper trial (*West Africa*, 1984: p. 2374). In Biya the Cameroonians found their new Messiah and, expectedly, showered him with love and public adulation. But how much did they actually know how their new president would govern them?

6. Political Slogans as Strategy of Power Consolidation

The Ahidjo-Biya succession schism of 1983 was a harbinger of the dawn of a new era in Cameroon politics. This new era was markedly different from the preceding quarter century of Ahidjo rule and made distinct by the infusion of ideas into the hitherto stale political life of Cameroon. Whether Biya knew it or not, he had introduced a novelty into the politics of his country that would eventually threaten his own power. The terms of agreement between Ahidjo and Biya that culminated with the transference of state powers to the latter are not yet known. It is probable that the former President and his Prime Minister may have arrived at some *modus vivendi* prior to his effecting the transfer of powers to Biya. What is clear, however, is the certainty with which Ahidjo conducted himself, which gave the appearance of sincerity on the part of the ex-president. That notwithstanding, Ahidjo seemed to have lost touch with the realities of politics. Perhaps he was just too tired to think properly, since he was purportedly very sick at the time. For this premier Cameroonian political genius called Ahidjo, this ill-conceived political gamble of 1982 was to be his last on the stage of a political system he had single-handedly crafted. Had he executed it properly, this act would have been Ahidjo's greatest: forever enshrining his name in the annals of Cameroon's political history as "father of the nation."

But Ahidjo's last political harvest was not to be bountiful. A quiet, smooth, and calculating political operator, Ahidjo's final political act was carried out in haste. He expended too much trust in Biya, a debilitating trait that men who wield political power must avoid. And so in his rush to effectuate a smooth transfer of the presidency to Paul Biya, Ahidjo imprudently concluded the transfer of power without first insuring the supremacy of the party over the state in the Constitution of the United Republic. This was very much unlike Ahidjo, who had amended the Constitution in 1979 to allow for the Prime Minister to succeed him instead of the President of the National Assembly (Levine, 1983: p. 23). Consequently, whatever illusions the CNU party chairman and ex-president may have nurtured about maintaining himself at the helm of the Cameroon power

structure collided with the ambition of his successor to the presidency, whose office, by the provisions of the Cameroon Constitution, was superior to that of the CNU party chairman.

Philippe Gaillard (1989) had duly noted the political savvy of Ahidjo. So what caused Ahidjo to act so rashly at that critical moment when he ought to have played his biggest hand in politics? If Ahidjo was as careful and deliberate a man who had "been planning his departure for some time" as Professor Le Vine would have us believe, what caused him to act so impetuously? Informed sources in Paris at the time had alluded to the fact that Ahidjo was suffering from diabetes and stomach ulcer. Ahidjo himself is noted to have told supporters that his doctors had advised him to take a complete rest for at least one year (LeVine, 1983: p. 22).

So it is probable that Ahidjo had intended a comeback, which explains why Biya took the necessary actions to forestall such an eventuality. A onetime Cameroonian journalist familiar with the political intrigues of Cameroon has asserted that François Sengat-Kuoh, special adviser to the political secretary of Ahidjo's Cameroon National Union (CNU) party, was the man in whom Ahidjo confided his plans to return to power. "Unfortunately for Ahidjo, the man to whom he confided his schemes... leaked it out to Biya" (Ofege, 2006). Whatever the case may have been, the miscalculation was Ahidjo's--especially in view of the fact that André Fouda, the late Mayor of Yaoundé and longtime friend of Ahidjo, had personally admonished Ahidjo against transmitting power to a Beti. Ahidjo listened, but he failed to heed Fouda's advice.

By neglecting advice of Fouda, Ahidjo personally summoned the past that came to haunt him in the present. Even though by selecting Biya the decision cost Ahidjo personally, it was probably good for the nation because Biya was the best qualified candidate for the job at that juncture in the political history of Cameroon. For the pragmatic nationalist that Ahidjo had been throughout his political career, even in his moment of grave political error, he rose to the occasion by placing the interest of Cameroon above his personal power.

7. Echoes from the Colonial Past

Bayart (1988: p. 4) has revealed that immediately upon his assumption of the office of president, the first act that Biya performed in his new capacity was to receive a Beti-Bulu delegation in the Unity Palace—home of the president. This delegation ostensibly called to congratulate him upon his rise to the highest office in the land. This gesture was significant, particularly when examined from an historical perspective and in the light of political events from the past, which began to gradually impinge on the present. Although it is customary for Cameroonian ministers to welcome tribe's people upon being appointed to office, the president of all Cameroonians ought not to have received his tribesmen in the; for that office transcends clan, tribe, and ethnic proclivities.

Cameroon has more than 250 ethnic groups and ethnicity plays a significant role in the politics of the country. In order to understand the role of ethnicity in the politics of modern Cameroon we must come to grips with how the larger national society, made up of sub-societies based on ethnic affiliations, is organized. Kinship was and still is the most pervasive principle of organization in Cameroon. It constitutes relationships of consanguinity and affinity among persons as well as tribal and ethnic groups. These relationships govern the rules of descent, inheritance, succession, patterns of residence, and political trust and confidence. Kinship relations were important to President Ahidjo's hold on power and are important to President Biya's power base as well.

Western scholars have seldom written about Africa without making reference to tribalism (Mafeje: 1971: pp. 253-261). They have time and again condemned "tribalism" (or ethnicity) in Africa, portraying it as negative and explaining it as a politically divisive variable (Geertz: 1962, p. 11). Although this view among westerners is ideologically informed and not based solely on rigorous analysis of tribalism, it has some grain of truth in it.

This condemnation of tribalism in Africa has engendered the association of tribalism with negativity among many Africans as well. But tribalism, as a force of social cohesion, is not in itself bad. It is the uses to which it is put, and the results derived from those uses, that are bad. Most Cameroonians are tribe's people, and many who share in the bounty of the State through tribal affiliation tend to assiduously pay lip service to the concept of "Cameroonian nationality".

Cameroon's political history reveals that only a few Cameroonians who ever rose to national prominence overcame tribalism: those were the leaders of the old UPC. But even for the UPC leaders, the center of their universe and the bastion of their struggle for independence rested among their tribe's people. Indeed, among the major nationalist groups such as the Bamileke, Bassa, Douala, and Bamoum who fought French colonial depredation in Cameroon, the nationalists were supported and protected by their own tribesmen. They rose above tribalism not by denying it, but by using it as a positive vehicle towards national integration. They knew where tribalism gave way to nationalism, and for this reason the rank and file of the multi-ethnic nationalist UPC party recognized their leader, Um Nyobe, as "*le guide éclairé et incorruptible*" ((National Archives Yaounde, 1957 : p. 19). It is doubtful that the Beti-Bulu delegation that called at the presidency upon Biya's assumption of that office did so out of altruistic or nationalist motives. So why did the Beti-Bulu delegation visit President Biya at the Unity Palace? The answer to this question can be sought from the colonial past of French Cameroun, in a political episode of momentous consequences that has been passed down to us *l'affaire Mbida*.

8.L'Affaire Mbida of 1958

In February 1958 André-Marie Mbida, a Beti tribesman and first Prime Minister of French Cameroun, was removed from office by a vote of no confidence in the Legislative Assembly and Ahmadou Ahidjo, the vice premier, was elected in his stead. Since that time the Beti had held Ahidjo responsible for the downfall of Mbida. The rise of Biya in 1982 therefore presented the Beti an opportunity for revenge. The fact, however, is that Mbida and Ahidjo were instruments of French policy in Cameroon. The French were responsible for the rise and fall of Mbida (1957-1958), just as they were responsible for the rise and fall of Ahidjo (1958-1982).

The Beti had erroneously blamed the fall of Mbida in February 1958 on Ahidjo. Mbida was the principal architect of his own downfall. Much like Biya's early years in power, Mbida's few months as prime minister could well be characterized as an exercise in incompetent politics. Barely a few months after becoming prime minister, Mbida became so unpopular that a fellow Beti politician and ex-seminarian, Charles Okala, took the lead in welding a coalition in the Legislative Assembly (that comprised five independent legislators, including Okala himself; Ahidjo's twenty-nine member *Bloc Democratique Camerounais*; the twelve-man dissension-ridden Mbida's *Democrates Camerounais*; the eight delegates of Soppo Priso's and Charles Assale's *Action Nationale*, and the *Paysans Independants'* seven-member group that represented the Bamileke and was led by Daniel Kemajou and M. Njine) against Mbida (Hempstone, 1961: p. 207; LeVine: 1964: p. 163).

Mbida's troubles did not end with his removal from office, however. The ex-premier's bodyguards had located a Bassa man loitering near his home and, assuming that he was a UPC assassin, they beat him so severely that he died. Proceedings were initiated to strip Mbida of his parliamentary immunity so that a warrant for his arrest could be issued. Mbida stealthily boarded a plane and flew to Paris, thus escaping justice. He later joined Felix-Roland Moumié, his erstwhile arch enemy, in Conakry (Hempstone, 1961: p. 207). If any person other than Mbida himself was to blame for the fall from power of the first Prime Minister of French Cameroun, that person was Charles Okala, not Ahidjo. Be it as it may, it was the French who hatched and

orchestrated the plan to topple Mbida; Okala merely executed it.

Mbida was elected prime minister and head of government of French Cameroun on May 15, 1957, by 56 votes against Ahidjo's 10. Ahidjo thus became the vice premier and Minister of Interior, and Pierre Messmer, the French High Commissioner in Cameroon, the representative of France in Mbida's government (Cameroon National Assembly, n.d.: p. 38). But the Legislative Assembly did not please Messmer with the selection of Mbida and so the French minister in Cameroon declined to send Mbida the usual congratulatory message demanded by protocol (National Archives Yaounde, 1956). Messmer is noted to have confided after the election of Mbida that, the scenario had already been decided and that Ahidjo will become prime minister after Mbida would have been discredited (Chaffard, 1965: p. 302). The French had thus determined the course of the evolution of political leadership in Cameroun long before Mbida was removed from office. Mbida and Ahidjo were mere pawns in the political game that the French played in Paris, whose reverberations adversely affected Cameroun.

Nevertheless, Mbida's contribution to the collapse of his government cannot be overlooked, since the roles human beings play in politics are directed by personal efforts and are not predetermined. Mbida could have changed his political destiny by being less autocratic and by showing some flexibility towards the UPC. Mbida's downfall may be attributed to the hard-line he took with regards to the nationalist UPC party, and his outmoded views with regards to Cameroun's independence in the near future and reunification with the British Cameroons, which he opposed, at a time when it was being supported by all the major Camerounian political parties (Le Vine, 1964: pp. 164-166). With many Camerounian politicians sympathetic to the UPC liberation struggle, Mbida decided to take an uncompromising position. At that juncture when the country needed leadership, Mbida "proved to be lacking in balanced judgment, impatient with democratic procedures, impulsive and intransigent" (Gardinier, 1963: p. 82). This appraisal of Mbida is the official French version of the man.

7.1. Too Unpredictable for the French

Professor Richard Joseph has opined out that Mbida had an "erratic personality" (Joseph, 1977: p. 343). But Mbida's unpredictability was not solely responsible for his demise from power. The French played a large role in creating the conditions that led to the collapse of his government. Mbida was prime minister for less than 10 months. He was relieved of his office probably because he could neither work cooperatively with Cameroonians nor fatefully serve the purpose for which the French had designed for him as prime minister.

A befuddling question that has never been answered is Mbida joined Moumié in Conakry after the French orchestrated his downfall. Was Mbida in fact an enemy of the UPC? The French may have allowed Mbida to become prime minister in 1957 in the hope that he could be persuaded to cooperate with their plans for eliminating the UPC menace. It is also plausible that Mbida's downfall was orchestrated by the French because he failed to concede to the French demands to grant them permission to exterminate the UPC. This perspective is informed by the fact Mbida's successor, Ahmadou Ahidjo, was a more willing accomplice of the French who signed on to the French campaign to assassinate Um Nyobe barely a few months after taking office.

Ahidjo was installed as prime minister in February 1958; the French assassinated Um Nyobe in September of that same year. The removal of Mbida and the assassination of Um Nyobe were not coincidental developments. Mbida was no longer deemed useful to the French enterprise in Cameroun. And so he had to go. Fittingly, the French discarded Mbida by utilizing other Camerounians and, by so doing, set a pattern that has persisted to this day, whereby Camerounians in power who fail to take their orders from France would, without further consideration, be summarily jettisoned.

8. The Measure of French Influence on Cameroon Politics

The selection of Mbida in 1957 by the Camerounian legislators seems to have gone against the political script written for Cameroun by the French. The French wanted some predictable, not erratic, person with a malleable personality at the head of the new government. Mbida was a strong supporter of French colonization in Cameroun. Even though he did not quite fit the French ideal of an indigenous leader in whom the interests of France in Cameroun could be entrusted, he was the best possible candidate at the time. In as much as Mbida was stubborn, he definitely was no Ruben Um Nyobe--the UPC leader and avowed enemy of French colonialism in Cameroun. Professor Joseph has provided this illuminating account of the quandary in which Mbida's actions placed his French benefactors.

The French...were themselves confronted with the problem of having hoisted into power a Prime Minister who was proving to be '*plus royaliste que le roi*'. Not only was Mbida making it quite plain that he was against a full amnesty being granted the UPC, but he also declared before the French National Assembly in April 1957 that Cameroun lacked the political and economic maturity for independence, a stage which should therefore take another ten years. Within the country, despite the deliberate refraining of the UPC from violent activities, the Prime Minister was uncompromising in his opposition to the nationalists (Joseph, 1974: p. 441).

In office Mbida became a nuisance to the French, by refusing to take direct orders from them; but his greatest miscalculation was that he simultaneously alienated his fellow Camerounian politicians.

Pierre Messmer, the French High Commissioner in Cameroun, was not up to the task of plotting Mbida's removal. The French government decided to dispatch Jean Ramadier, the forty-four-year-old son of former French Socialist Premier Paul Ramadier, from Paris to Yaoundé with specific instructions to resolve "l'affaire Mbida". Ramadier was to take over from Messmer as the French High Commissioner in Cameroun, and to ease the replacement of Mbida with Ahidjo (Joseph, 1977: p. 343). In vain did Mbida try to stymie his removal from office by rushing to Paris in order to utilize his contacts there to annul the machinations that were being brewed against him in Yaoundé. Jean Ramadier succeeded in mobilizing the Camerounian legislators against the prime minister (Chaffard, 1965: pp. 319 and 327).

The fall of Mbida was a very complex affair and intricately linked to the French strategy for destroying the UPC. Ndeh Ntumazah, the last of the original five UPC had offered an illuminating narrative that shed some light on the fall of Mbida. In 1956, Mbida had contested the legislative election against his protégé, Dr. Louis-Paul Aujoulat, and won. Mbida's success at the polls, according to Ntumazah, was due largely to the support given him by the UPC. In order to retain the UPC support, however, Mbida concluded an agreement with the nationalist party on specific terms for a 10-year objective to secure both unification and independence. Ntumazah obviously felt that it was this program of action that led to the political demise of Mbida and his replacement as Prime Minister by Ahidjo in 1958. Aujoulat, who was Colonial Secretary of France *Outre-Mer* from 1949 to 1953, continued to be a useful instrument of French policy in Cameroon and is said to have been responsible for recruiting and promoting Paul Biya who later succeeded Ahmadou Ahidjo as President of Cameroon (Ntumazah, 1991: p. 5). If this narrative is factual, then the Cameroon presidential succession of 1982 was probably planned long before it happened.

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