

Chapter 4

The Campaign and the Media

The Campaign Period

The official campaign period for the 1997 parliamentary elections in Cameroon ran from 3 May 1997 to midnight on 16 May. The 180 National Assembly seats were contested in 58 constituencies, with candidates standing from 45 political parties. As stated in Chapter 1, with the exception of the CPDM, all the political parties were formed following the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1991.

Of the three major parties, the governing CPDM contested all 180 seats; the SDF, 167 seats; and the UNDP, 160 seats. There were a total of 1,165 candidates, of whom less than one per cent were women.

Despite early complaints about the short notice given for the nomination of candidates (see Chapter 3), the ability of most candidates to mount campaigns did not appear to have been seriously hampered. Many were already well known in their areas, and had been canvassing support for some time. In fact, some opposition parties had been campaigning since the legislative elections of 1992.

The electoral law covers the administrative framework of the campaign – including the term of the official campaign period, the requirements to submit a schedule of meetings/rallies to the local administrative authorities, and the prohibition of the distribution of partisan documents on polling day. The law also sought to set guidelines for the conduct of parties and their supporters during the campaign.

Given the number of parties contesting the elections, and the high level of awareness of the importance of the 1997 contest, we expected the campaign to have a more striking visual impact. We were surprised by the absence of the large posters and painted roadside billboards so common during election campaigns elsewhere. One of the reasons was that the electoral law limited the size of posters to 45 centimetres by 65 centimetres. Under the provisions of the law, candidates were offered space for displaying posters, manifestos, and other canvassing material near each polling station (the locations of which were not always known) and near sub-divisional and council offices, and some certainly made use of these facilities. However, in most government offices only the CPDM manifesto was displayed. In at least one province, these posters were meticulously removed on the eve of poll.

Rallies, meetings, and door-to-door canvassing took place in a lively, but calm, free and, in the main, tolerant atmosphere. There was general agreement among the political parties contesting the elections, that this was a marked improvement on campaigning in the past and a sign of the growing maturity of Cameroon's political parties.

We witnessed participation by supporters and party activists at rallies in Yaoundé before our deployment, and in all the provinces to which we were deployed. Participants in rallies grew noticeably more enthusiastic as polling day approached. It appeared to us that each party was allowed to campaign within the requirements of the law in an unhindered manner. Indeed, some meetings/rallies were held by different parties in sequence at the same place on the same day, and with one or two minor exceptions, all passed off peacefully.

The presence of the major party leaders drew the largest crowds. They began touring the country extensively even before the start of the official campaign period. Small rallies organised by local party activists introducing their candidates were also well attended and well organised. Many of these took place under the 'chairmanship' of a local dignitary who was often the local chief and supported the party in question. At the climax of the campaign, on the eve of the poll, the Prime Minister (CPDM) attended huge rallies in Buea (the capital of his home province) and in Yaoundé. Mr Fru Ndi of the SDF addressed an equally large number of people in Bamenda.

Crowds were addressed in French, English, local languages and in 'pidgin', with local issues and culture being used to convey each party's message and to encourage support.

As is true elsewhere, incumbency gave a clear campaigning advantage to the governing



'Campaign wrappa' ... political parties printed cloth ('wrappa') in their party colours which was then made into clothes by party supporters: here, a length is hung between two trees, poster like

party. In a country so large and with terrain as difficult as it is in some parts of Cameroon, access to air travel (planes or helicopters) or to fleets of hardy vehicles, were significant factors in the governing party's favour. In the early days of the transition, prior to the last national elections in 1992, the Government financed all political parties from central funds, but on the grounds that it placed too heavy a burden on the state, the practice ceased almost immediately.



The next generation? ... Commonwealth Observer Margaret Alva (centre), Member of Parliament for 23 years, meets a female parliamentary candidate hoping to start her parliamentary career at a rally in South-West Province

The electoral law sets no limit on the amount of money an individual may donate to a political party, nor the amount that may be spent during election campaigns.

A number of candidates were serving government officials. For example, in one province, the government-appointed chief executives of two municipal councils (Government Delegates) both stood as candidates for seats. In most systems of democratic government officials are required to resign before running for political office.

The Media

The media in Cameroon are subject to the 1990 Law Relating to Freedom of Mass Communication. In 1996 an amendment to the Law abolished pre-publication censorship for domestic publications, although not for imported ones. Nevertheless, commentators continue to allege that the Government has retained other forms of prior restraint, such as seizure of printed editions, and bans on certain titles. Some leading journalists have suffered periods of detention without charge or trial, whilst others have been prosecuted under the charge of 'criminal defamation', often following an article critical of the Government. Various international media organisations have voiced their concerns about press freedom in Cameroon.

The Union of Journalists of Cameroon told us that earlier in the year the Union had initiated a programme, Media for Democracy, with the aim of ensuring objective reporting of the 1997 elections. Some 400 reporters underwent training at a workshop on election reporting, at the end of which they adopted the slogan 'Reporters, not supporters'. The consensus was that there was need to stop biased election coverage. We were told, however, that in all news organisations, policy is decided by the editors-in-chief, and that consequently reporting on the parliamentary elections remained subjective. In particular we were told that the electronic media gave an unfair advantage to the ruling CPDM in the election campaign but others disputed this.

Radio and Television

The electronic media, which reach a far larger section of the population than the print media, are entirely under state control. Broadcasts are in both official languages – French and English.

The Ministry of Communications devised a basis for the sharing of airtime on radio and television for all the contesting parties in the weeks preceding the elections. Critics complained that the slots for the opposition were mostly during non peak-viewing hours, and that the reports of the opposition campaigns lacked depth. However, our observations did not bear this out.

Cameroon Television (CRTV) reports of election results started on Sunday 18 May, the day after the elections, and showed the CPDM with a strong, early majority. These reports were not based on any official figures and provoked counter claims from the opposition parties.

Print Media

With regard to the print media, it was apparent to us that Cameroon now has a vigorous and reasonably free press, with some 50 newspapers in circulation, though not all on a daily basis. There is a government-owned daily newspaper, *The Cameroon Tribune*, which is bilingual. Many of the other newspapers, in both languages, openly support one or other of the opposition parties and are often critical of the Government. It is common at election time for a number of new papers to emerge, and the 1997 parliamentary elections period was no exception.