

Cameroon: In the name of the king

Monday 2 March 2020, by [NDENGUE Rose](#), [WAKAI Kangsen Feka](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2020).

Authoritarianism, oligarchy, and patriarchy governs the Cameroonian political landscape.

The bulk of commentary prompted by Cameroon's 2018 presidential elections underscored its significance, as [the elections represented a historic moment](#) that signaled a possibility of change at the country's helm. However, any pointed analysis must consider that the dynamics of the country's political status quo is impervious to change. The country's political landscape remains structurally authoritarian, patriarchal, oligarchical, and characterized by an entrenched patronage system wherein women are hardly represented and rendered invisible. This was the case during the 2018 elections, which did not have a female candidate, nor did any woman feature prominently in the media landscape leading up to the vote. Those who have defied the economic and social barriers imposed on them by the current system to engage politically are a minority and remain marginalized. Interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 with women political figures representing civil society and political parties, both of the opposition and party in power, provided a [damning appraisal of women's experiences](#). They denounced a political system that erects economic and social barriers, and that disempowers them, denying any type of political access to a majority of the population. In addition, the women from opposition parties argue that the regime doesn't hesitate to resort to violence against its current and potential political opponents. Thus, the place of women on the country's political chessboard, as their experiences revealed in interviews and as recent political developments illustrate, explains how the regime in power has managed to sustain itself. Three related issues are at play: power is confiscated and personified by an oligarchy, they enable a system of impoverishment resulting in social and economic precariousness, and they use tools of the state to violently maintain law and order to safeguard their interests.

While the experience of women in Cameroonian politics is mirrored globally, in the case of Cameroon it takes on a particular character, evidenced by the relative absence of women in the country's main institutions. Those who overcome existing barriers to partake in governance often do so at the whim of the oligarchy, whose ranks are filled with those who personify the three fundamental ethos of political power in the country: patriarchy, gerontocracy, and prominence. The institutions that wield the most power; the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, President of the National Assembly, and Senate President are all far over sixty years old. The scenario is no different in the ranks of prominent opposition parties, especially those that emerged in the 1990s. It is most glaring in the case of the Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (UNDP), an ally of the ruling Rassemblement démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC); the Union Démocratique du Cameroun (UDC); and the Social Democratic Front (SDF) whose leaders' ages range from their early to late seventies. Convinced that they embody their party's values, particularly the desire for eventual change, these founding leaders also cling to their positions of power. Therefore, retaining and personalizing power has emerged as the engine driving political figures in the country, rendering it impossible to form the kind of opposition coalition that would be necessary to take on the regime. Though four out of the nine candidates in the 2018 presidential elections were fifty-years old and younger, the political landscape remains unchanged despite each of them casting themselves in providential terms. While their efforts might have chipped at the gerontocracy, it also demonstrates an entrenched patriarchal political landscape where elections are

only contested amongst men.

This tendency is partly why the regime remains in power. In this context, the women in politics tend to have no choice but to adapt to a society where social justice is nonexistent. The interviews with women politicians illustrate the impact this has had, with a majority of the population not able to participate in politics, and with their continued inability to access resources, social, economic, and political rights. The economic downturn that resulted from the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the late nineteen eighties only entrenched a regime that has misgoverned the country. With dwindling access to basic needs: clean water, electricity, healthcare, and education, the masses have been reduced to seeking instant gratification. Due to the failure of state institutions, the bulk of the population has grown to rely on those who control the levers of social, economic, and political power. Despite these realities, the ruling RDPC party has been steadfast in deflecting the regime's role in the pauperization of the masses. In their declarations and speeches, the ruling party leadership and government officials, including President Paul Biya, have never taken responsibility for the disastrous state of the country. In messages deployed in the media, which also represent the ruling party's position, the RDPC, often defers the responsibility of raising standards of the living to the masses themselves. The masses are encouraged "... to take their destinies in their own hands" (*petit guide*). This has resulted in a system of political engagement that Jean François Bayart has called "Belly Politics." Barely surviving on the margins, the masses are transformed into electoral pawns whose votes are battered for basic food supplies during political campaigns. The women politicians observed that the masses' political engagement is often driven by their preoccupation with daily survival and how they stand to benefit materially or financially from it. This is a reality, sustained by an authoritarian system, that transcends region and ideology.

This authoritarian hold on the country is reliant on a systematic violence that is both physical and symbolic. Public policies, as well as citizens inclusion in political institutions, are often portrayed as privileges granted at the benevolence of the head of state. Consequently, the head of state has been elevated to a divine monarch who is glorified for every public initiative. This political culture has reduced, absorbed, and negated any meaningful political mobilization that could lead to changes in the political order. The status quo has been to neutralize criticism in the media, or by working in the shadows to sow disruption, as was the case with an incident that was broadcast on live TV in the 2018 presidential elections. When these methods do not yield results, the system digs into its authoritarian arsenal, deploying violence to impose its will. They often resort to the arbitrary arrest and detention of ordinary citizens, prominent civil society activists, trade unionists, journalists, and political opponents of the regime. In the process, they are often brutalized, and in some cases have been tortured. It is no surprise then that the protests led by lawyers and teachers in the Anglophone regions in 2016 were violently suppressed. Journalists like Mimi Mefo, detained from November 7th-10th, 2018, and Michel Biem Tong, detained from October 23rd, 2018 to December 15th, 2018, were both arrested for practicing their profession. Meanwhile, militants and members of opposition parties have often been violently repressed, especially when engaging in public political activity. Michèle Ndoki, a lawyer and official of the Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun (MRC) led by Professor Maurice Kamto—the incumbent's principal challenger during the 2018 elections—was arrested during a protest march against electoral irregularities in Douala. Also arrested was Kah Walla, leader of the Cameroon People's Party (CPP) and coordinator of the Stand Up for Cameroon initiative, a grassroots movement that engages in direct action against the regime and its bad governance. In fact, the regime is often at its most violent when faced with grassroots movements that champion the issues of the masses on the margins, as was the case in February 2008 when youths in Douala and cities across the country protested rising living costs and Paul Biya's decision to amend the constitution to enable him to run for president for another term.

Beyond occasional jolts, the survival of the current regime is assured because the political landscape

in Cameroon is governed by personified authoritarianism, in essence a gerontocracy and patriarchy, which feeds on itself while stifling the social, economic, and political aspirations of the masses.

Translation by Kangsen Feka Wakai

Rose Ndengue
Kangsen Feka Wakai

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