

# Chapter 1

## Political Background

### Recent Political History

Cameroon achieved independence in 1960 and has a republican form of government. HE Mr Paul Biya is the incumbent President and executive Head of State. Cameroon was admitted into membership of the Commonwealth on 1 November 1995 and, along with a number of other Commonwealth member countries, also enjoys membership of *La Francophonie*.

The present political scene has its roots in the partition of the country into French and British Trust Territories with four-fifths of the territory under French administration, and the other one-fifth along the eastern border of Nigeria under British administration as the Northern and Southern Cameroons. In February 1961, a plebiscite held in Southern Cameroons voted in favour of the establishment of a federation with the Republic of Cameroon, while Northern Cameroons chose to join the Northern Region of Nigeria.

The Southern Cameroons thus became the Western State of the new Federal Republic of Cameroon on 1 October 1961. The Premier of the former Southern Cameroons, Dr John Foncha, assumed the vice-presidency of the Republic, the office of President being held by Mr Ahmadou Ahidjo. Both components of the federation retained their local parliaments.

### Moves Towards Unification

After federation, President Ahidjo pushed rapidly and determinedly for complete unification. In 1966, he persuaded most parties to join in the formation of a single national party, the *Union Nationale Camerounaise* (UNC), effectively turning the country into a one-party state. In a referendum held in May 1972, 99.7 per cent of the electorate approved a new constitution providing for a unitary state under a strong executive president. The new constitution came into effect on 2 June 1972.

In April 1975, President Ahidjo was re-elected unopposed as President with more than 99 per cent of the vote. In June that year, Mr Paul Biya, the former Secretary-General in the President's Office, was appointed to the new post of Prime Minister. In November 1982, President Ahidjo transferred power to Mr Biya. This was followed by a period of political instability. A congress was called in March 1985 at which the UNC was renamed *Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais* (in English and hereafter, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement – CPDM). President Biya stood as the sole candidate in the presidential elections of 1984 and 1988, securing 99 per cent of the votes cast on each occasion.

On 6 December 1990, the National Assembly approved a constitutional amendment providing for the establishment of a multi-party system. Under the revised constitution, the Government was required to grant or refuse registration within three months to any political association seeking legal recognition, and registered parties were to receive state support during election campaigns. The recruitment of party activists on a regional or ethnic basis was, however, prohibited. In 1990, the Government also established the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms under the chairmanship of Dr Solomon Nfor Gwei.

By September 1991, close to 40 political parties had been legalised. The Social Democratic Front (SDF), the *Union Démocratique du Cameroun* (UDC), and the *Mouvement Social pour la Nouvelle Démocratie* (MSND), all emerged with considerable followings and called for the holding of a sovereign national conference.

In October 1991, President Biya announced that the first multi-party parliamentary elections would be held in February 1992. The President also set up a Tripartite Forum in November 1991, with representation from the Government, the opposition and independent personalities, to examine the question of constitutional reform. Some opposition parties declined to participate.

### The 1992 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

Multi-party legislative elections to a 180-member National Assembly were held on 1 March 1992. In protest that these elections were taking place without any change in the existing constitution, only 32 out of the 70 registered political parties participated. Among those that boycotted the polls was the main opposition party, the SDF.

Four parties shared the seats in the new Assembly: the ruling CPDM won 88; the *Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (UNDP), a predominantly regional party based in the north of the country, won 68; the *Union des Populations Camerounaises* (UPC), a faction of the party that led the independence movement, obtained 18; and the *Mouvement pour la Défense de la République* (MDR), a regional party from the Far North Province, took six. The ruling party entered into an alliance with the MDR to secure an absolute majority.

In August 1992, President Biya announced that the presidential election scheduled for April 1993, would be brought forward to October 1992. As efforts to agree on a single opposition candidate did not succeed, there were six candidates for the presidency: Mr Paul Biya (CPDM); Mr John Fru Ndi (SDF); Mr Maigari Bello Bouba (UNDP); Mr Adamou Ndam Njoya (UDC); Mr Jean-Jacques Ekindi (*Mouvement Progressif*); and Mr Ema Otou Nze (*Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques*).

The presidential election held on 11 October 1992, was observed by a team from the National Democratic Institute, USA, and other groups, but the result was dogged by controversy. The Government issued provisional figures (at 25 per cent and 50 per cent of the total votes counted) suggesting a Biya victory with 50 per cent of the ballot. This was challenged by one of the opposition parties. The Supreme Court dismissed the case on technical grounds.

On 21 October, ten days after polling, with the official figures still awaited, Mr Fru Ndi declared himself winner with 38.57 per cent of the vote, with 36.86 per cent for Mr Biya. The official result declared on 23 October gave Mr Biya victory over Mr Fru Ndi by a margin of 39.97 per cent to 35.94 per cent (a difference of under 120,000 votes). There were widespread protests in the two anglophone provinces and, on 27 October 1992, a State of Emergency was declared in the North-West Province. Some of the leaders of the SDF and a large number of its supporters were detained. The State of Emergency was lifted three months later.

### Constitutional Reform, 1992-96

During the 1992 campaign, President Biya had announced his political programme which included: constitutional reform; the establishment of regional governments; a clear separation of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary; the removal of press censorship; and the creation of a Government of National Unity in which the opposition would be represented.

The opposition's main demand was to hold a national conference on constitutional reform. In March 1993, the Government constituted a Technical Commission to prepare recommendations based on proposals received from all sectors of the community.

The Government had published draft constitutional amendments which provided for a democratic system of government, restricted the powers of the President whose tenure was limited to two five-year terms of office, and proposed that future elections comprise two rounds of voting. The unitary state was to be retained whilst introducing a more decentralised system of government. These proposals were subject to further modification on receipt of the recommendations of the Technical Commission.

The remainder of 1993 and much of 1994 were marked by civil and political unrest. At the end of 1994, President Biya convened a Constitutional Consultative Committee (CCC) to deliberate on constitutional arrangements. The UNDP and the SDF refused to participate as long as the members of the CCC were appointed and not elected; other opposition parties were initially represented, but many of their representatives subsequently withdrew.

The new constitution was unanimously adopted by the National Assembly in December 1995, and promulgated by President Biya in January 1996. Of the 353 amendments proposed by the opposition parties, about 70 were incorporated. The Constitution still allowed for the appointment by the President of the Prime Minister, the Senate, and all 11 members of the

proposed Constitutional Council. The President retained the power to appoint Regional Delegates to preside over elected Regional Assemblies.

Local government elections originally scheduled for 1992 were twice postponed, finally taking place in January 1996. In these elections, the opposition parties took outright control of seven out of ten provincial capitals and a large number of other councils. The Central Government, however, appointed 'Government Delegates' as chief executives of all the major cities.

### **The 1997 Parliamentary Elections**

The 1997 parliamentary elections were held on Saturday 17 May 1997. These elections were seen as critical and were keenly contested by 45 political parties. All 180 seats in the National Assembly were contested, distributed in 58 constituencies in the ten provinces, with a complex mix of single and multiple member constituencies. A 'winner takes all' system applied when any party secured an absolute majority (more than 50 per cent) of the vote in a constituency. However, a mix of the first-past-the-post and proportional representation systems came into play if no party obtained a clear majority.

### **The Major Political Parties**

As stated above, 45 political parties participated in the elections but not all contested seats in all ten provinces. The following are the main political parties:

***The Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM)*** The CPDM was the sole political party during the one-party era. Formed in 1985 from the UNC, it had been the governing party under former President Ahidjo. At the last parliamentary elections in 1992, the CPDM won 88 out of 180 seats in the National Assembly. It then governed in coalition with two smaller parties – the MDR and the UPC.

***The Social Democratic Front (SDF)*** The SDF was the first party to challenge the one-party system and is the largest of the opposition parties. It has strong support in the North-West, West, and the Littoral Provinces. The party boycotted the last parliamentary elections in 1992, but performed well in the January 1996 municipal elections.

***The Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (UNDP)*** The UNDP, with 68 seats, led by Mr Maigari Bello Bouba, a former Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition since 1992, was the largest opposition party in the last parliament. The results of the January 1996 municipal elections indicated that the party's support was concentrated in Adamaua and North Provinces, with some support in the Far North Province.

***Union des Populations Camerounaises (UPC)*** The UPC is the oldest political party in the country. It has now split into two factions, the UPC 'K' and the UPC 'N'. Prior to the split, the UPC won 18 seats in the last parliament.

***Mouvement pour la Défense de la République (MDR)*** This party's support is concentrated in the Far North Province where it won six seats in the last parliament. Since 1992, the MDR had been a coalition partner in government with the CPDM.

***Union Démocratique du Cameroun (UDC)*** The UDC is led by Mr Adamou Ndam Njoya, a former Minister under President Ahidjo. The party's strongest support comes from Mr Njoya's home *departement* of Noun.