

## **Workshop Theme: Rising above crisis: Deliberative democracy and consolidation of democracy in Central Africa**

### **General Summary:**

This workshop session examines the state of democracy especially from the perspective of deliberative democracy and the fundamental challenges to both the practice and consolidation of democracy drawing from case studies of three states with elective civil rule in the Central African region. The goal is to tease out the challenges and limits of democracy as well as explore the prospects of employing and widening deliberative democracy.

The above would entail unravelling risks and threats to the deepening of democracy in the region. The session also seeks to establish how these threats can be overcome to extend and sustain democracy, improve its responsiveness to the felt needs of citizens and utilise it as a pathway to sustainable development in a region that has been eroded by crisis and unhealthy contests over power.

While there may be debates about the import and empirical usefulness of deliberative democracy particularly in the studies of developing societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, such studies tend to ignore local discursive contexts and their embedded ethos of consensus building and rule of the majority. Indeed, these deliberative practices which underpin the social values and norms of governance in traditional and precolonial societies in the continent persist but are not aligned to harmonize with spaces of modern governance. This gap between local traditional deliberative practices and governance processes of the state confines the so-called restored democracies in Africa to mere electoral practices without democratic substance.

Hence, the potentials of these discursive and consensus-based traditional practices to support democratisation is glossed over. However, democracy should inevitably be understood as going beyond the rituals of election and party politics to include participation, inclusion, and responsiveness to the needs of citizens among others. Centrally, local deliberative spaces should be harnessed for conversations on issues affecting the citizens including conflict in the power acquisition bid. The studies suggest that failure to take steps towards this necessary participative inclusion over the years has meant that democracy have been undermined by dictatorial appropriation of elections and the penchant for persistent hold on political power by political elites while neglecting popular will across the region. There has also been the projection of violence and conflict as routes towards power and political relevance.

The above issues are the core concerns of this workshop and are examined from differing perspectives utilising the examples of three countries in the sub-region viz. Chad, Gabon, and Cameroon. These studies while underlining diverse methodological approaches underscore the overwhelming need to consolidate democracy not only through deliberative practices but equally reframe traditional norms and values of governance as critical to deepening democracy, building peace, and enthroning development in the subregion.

## **Summary of the three Selected Cases:**

### **1. Deliberative democracy and conflict resolution in Chad**

**Speakers:** J. Tochukwu Omenma & Chikodiri Nwangwu

In Chad today, the common mindset is that power can only be captured by violent production and it belongs to those groups who fight for it and their heirs. Given this, we seek to take seriously the absence of political debates on one hand, and the production of violence and counter-violence as means of alternation of power on the other hand. Research about this puzzle has produced contradictory findings. Some assume that weak parliamentary institution with no real power accounts for the absence of political debates that will help promote democracy. Others argue that the binary configuration of forces, Muslim north against Christian south, feeds the interest of hegemonic elites, and instead of promoting inclusive political debates choose for troop deployment that supports pseudo-democratisation efforts.

Our study departs from these hypotheses/theses to study positive signs of political activities as well as socio-cultural relations at the community-level that will address (a) the dynamic of power and counter-power relations of groups and, (b) distrust and grievances that generate conflicts between and among ethnic groups in Chad. To address the interrelated puzzles, we draw upon deliberative democracy, with particular attention on deliberative equality, which states that equality is best achieved when disempowered groups deliberate within themselves before entering the broader public sphere. Deliberation fulfils its role in conflict resolution and democratic legitimacy when decisions are product of a broader range of perspectives rather than participants' 'status', 'number' or 'access to authority and power'.

We test this perspective by presenting case study of traditional authorities and stakeholder evidence of participations and decision-making at rural communities of the Arabs and non-Arabs. By this, we aim at identifying positive actions towards social relations; explaining stakeholders' roles in conflict resolutions; and towards broader citizen-driven actions away from the binary cultural analysis of Muslim north against Christian south.

### **2. Feasibility of Deliberative Democracy in Gabon**

**Speaker:** Bernard Nwosu, PhD

It is unusual in the literature to associate deliberativeness with fledgling democracies that merely have formal institutions of liberal democracy without substantial deepening of democratic rights and processes. Thus, scholarly narratives on the so-called deliberative turn of democracy tends to project only countries considered to be advanced or successful liberal democracy. This predilection is only correct in one sense which is considering

deliberativeness as an outcome to be expected in a fully democratized polity. However, if it is understood as part of the growth dynamics that enhances the deepening of democracy which countries possess only in relative degrees, it offers opportunity for understanding it as a tool for growing democracy. Essentially therefore, this paper agrees that deliberation offers ways in which we can enhance democracy and criticize practices and institutions that do not live up to the normative standard. On that note, a long-standing elective regime in Africa with a history of political stability as well as a social security system that is relatively high by African standards invites an inquiry. Precisely, Gabon is the case instance of this study.

Gabon is a small country of 2.2 million persons in Central African sub-region which comprises seven countries. These countries have shared neighborhood effects on flawed elections, long-serving heads of state that have engaged in illegitimate self-succession despite constitutional provisions. Some of the regimes like Joseph Kabila's Congo Democratic Republic had also arranged for proxy succession when his self-succession plan failed. Gabon itself transitioned from self-succession in every election during the 42-year rule of Omar Bongo that ended in 2009 to hereditary succession which produced his son Ali Bongo as the current president (see Nwosu, 2012).

Gabon became independent from France in 1960 and was expected to develop along the lines of liberal democracies. However, the political history of the country by some historical design, became bound up with the personal history of Albert Bernard Bongo who later became Omar Bongo Ondimba. His presidency that lasted from 1967 to 2009 under Omar Bongo Ondimba has implications for democracy and its analysis. He abolished the vice presidency which offered him the route to power, established a one-party regime, set up structures that entrenched his family and his ethnic group and cronies in power. The capture of state institutions by the Bongo clan led to an easy succession of the late Omar Bongo by his son Ali Bongo. Ali has ruled Gabon since the death of his father in 2009. The same structures built by the late Omar enables the continuity of Ali Bongo in power despite his poor health condition for which he is constantly overseas for treatment. Gabon under the Bongos have tight control over the media, permits weak opposition parties some of which are regime collaborators. For civil society groups, it has a two-way relationship with them.

The first is local civil society which do not appear to have a critical disposition towards the state and on the other hand, the international Non-Governmental Organisations which tends to be more dispassionate or less afraid in their policy engagements with the state. Overall, the state/society connection in terms of the relations we have outlined here lays out the context of relationship between state and social forces. It is these relationships that have conditioned the state of communicative or deliberative engagement in Gabon.

Thus, the puzzles I intend to engage here include the nature of social forces generated by relational dynamics among citizens and state institutions and how they bear on equality, transparency and inclusiveness and ultimately, communicative participatory engagement. I argue that a net movement towards these variables represents increasing openness for the widening of communicative engagement of citizens with the state. At the very core, this study

is exploring the nature of social forces, actors and institutions whose engagements enhance or mitigate deliberative democracy

I adopt a qualitative driven mixed method that deploys much of political sociology approach. It is developed in a diachronic pattern by integrating historical, cultural and institutional analysis. The analysis relates equality, transparency, inclusiveness, deliberativeness as important products of the nature of power in society. Data on Gabon is drawn from major democracy measuring databases from which indicators that relate with deliberative democracy are drawn. Quantitative data over a period of thirty years are drawn from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Global State of Democracy (GSoD) indicators and Freedom House and analyzed. Data from BTI and Freedom House which are below thirty years would be used for comparative analysis as they contain substantial qualitative information.

Findings reveal substantial capture of state institutions and alignment of more powerful social forces with the current architecture of the state and with clear signs of persistence. But the minimal possibility of change lies in alliance of democratic actors especially the non-governmental organizations in establishing institutions of engagement for participative engagement.

### **3. From one party state to one party democracy: Deliberative democracy and the imperative of genuine democratization in Cameroon**

**Speaker:** Edlyne Anugwom

The study interrogates the nature and dynamics of democracy and democratization in Cameroon especially from the perspective of amenability to deliberative democracy built on popular participation, inclusiveness, and unfettered access of civil society to decision making and policy formulation within the spheres of civic governance. It recognises that Cameroon has had a chequered past produced mainly by its colonial heritage as one of the few states 'colonised' by three different colonial masters overtime. Cameroon has a population of about 28 million people and is divided into ten administrative provinces. It is currently governed by Paul Biya of the *Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM)* or *Rassemblement démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC)* in French). Incidentally, Biya and his ruling CPDM have been in control of state power for over forty years now. The country was established on both linguistic and historical fault lines deriving from its colonial experience; these have recently snowballed into a fractious conflict over autonomy/independence of Anglophone Southern Cameroon.

The study employed the desk review method in examining the roots, nature, and manifestations of democracy in Cameroon and its amenability to public deliberation. The review depended on published and grey literature on democracy and politics in the country. Therefore, the study while adopting a diachronic approach, privileges a thorough-going analysis of political developments in post-colonial Cameroon.

As the findings of this study show, apart from being overtly authoritarian in nature, democracy in Cameroun approximates the aggregative model. As a result, politics and politicking are anchored on what can be seen as immutable group or personal interests which are locked in a non-communicative political contest aimed at winning elections or leveraging superior electoral fortunes. The above process has engendered and furthered a heavily primordial political system where ethnicity, religion, language are critical factors in gaining political positions. In other words, the democratic space in Cameroon has not been liberated and tilts towards a one-party rule. This is because despite the existence of other recognised political parties, only one party has monopolised power for over four decades now. Thus, the expectation that civil society could be an invaluable player in both creating and fostering democratic ethos has not been met and democratic values have been largely eroded.

However, if we assume that deliberative democracy rightly is a principle or practice that emphasizes the role and participation of the citizens in the process of governance and development and is gauged by the role and value the system attributes to citizenship beyond those of active politicians and office holders, then Cameroon is far away from the above ideals and realities. While deliberative democracy anchors on creating a discursive public space which even though different from the state and society is the location of opinion formation and critical persuasions that influence the political system and decisions emanating from it, the evidence from Cameroon is that the public space is stifled and the participation of citizens in decision making is very marginal.

Be the above as it may, while the deliberative model may be criticised for simply agitating for the Athenian model of democracy (seen as futile nowadays), it coheres with the norms and values of governance and public administration in traditional African societies; the vestiges of which are still found in rural enclaves and communities in many parts of the continent. Thus, one may argue that the attempt of Habermas and company was to infuse a modern twist or dimension to an old African idea.

On face value, Cameroon's traditional socio-cultural norms and values of governance seems amenable to deliberative democracy. However, deliberative democracy can only be fostered through deepening existing democracy and rebooting and empowering civil society. While one is hesitant to use the concept of 'communitarian' deliberative democracy there is need to factor in the fact that given existing primordial differences and cleavages, public deliberation can only work in delimited spatial spaces and made inclusive especially at grassroot levels and empowers people irrespective of primordial status to freely deliberate on issues and policies concerning them or that could affect their social groups and communities. Therefore, while traditional norms and cultural heritage seem conducive to deliberative democracy in Cameroon, there is need for thorough radicalization of democracy in the country and rebuilding of the civil society towards political activism and participation.

A credible way for civil society in Cameroon to reposition itself and foster genuine democratization would be to key into the established and time-tested traditional norms of equality, reciprocity and participation that characterise traditional associational life and

governance. In this sense, civil society could depend on the undoubted utility of traditional structures to build a resilient and vibrant society. This would entail reorganising civil society and empowering it to tap into traditional positive plural engagement and generate a shift towards participatory governance and politics by citizens. While the above may not exactly mirror deliberative democracy, it would help create a space whereby citizens are unfettered to participate; enable the possibility of public deliberation at the local levels and in the process produce citizens that are not only politically active but are critical and desirous of taking part in decision making and agenda setting in the political arena.

However, for civil society to play its anticipated roles and be the harbinger of good democratic ethos and practice in Cameroon as well as be in the vanguard of human rights and liberties, it needs to overcome some constraints or weaknesses. These constraints include the non-liberalization of the political space; inability of a lot of the groups to achieve coherent organization and overcome internal contradictions; civil society has also failed to live beyond the curse of primordial and sectarian impulses in the larger society; the vitality and strength of these organizations have also been undermined by the strategic use of divide-and-rule tactics by the government. In effect, civil society in the country has failed to articulate a coherent and consistent framework of societal project or political aspiration for citizens.

From the foregoing the study recommends core strategies for strengthening democracy and infusion of deliberative practices in Cameroon. These *inter alia* include strengthening CSOs; improving and expanding local autonomy (provincial and regional governance); strengthening and radically privileging autonomy of electoral institutions; improving economic growth; enthroning measures that promote equity and justice; constitutional decentralization of power at the centre; deepening democratic culture through increasing public participation and tapping into traditional norms and values of governance.