

SDF's Flirtation with the Anglophone Problem in Cameroon Since 1990

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ABSTRACT

Created on May 26, 1990 as an "Anglophone" political party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) dillydallied with the Anglophone Problem in Cameroon politics with very disastrous consequences. This paper argues that the founding fathers of the SDF were pushed by the marginalisation, assimilation, exploitation and denigration of Anglophones by the Francophone dominated government of Yaounde to create their party. The SDF was therefore considered by many of the founders as the mouthpiece of the Anglophones but unfortunately this initial mission of the party was gradually and systematically ignored by the party leaders. Based on evidence from primary and secondary sources, the study reveals that the dwindling fortunes of the SDF in Cameroon politics since 1990, is largely linked to its flirtation and the inconsistency of its politics vis-à-vis the plight and grievances of the Anglophones. The party may therefore eventually disappear if it fails to dance to the turn of its electoral and traditional fief which is Anglophone Cameroon.

Key Words: Anglophones, Cameroon, Politics, SDF, Inconsistency

The Origins of the SDF Idea

The background to the birth of the SDF can better be stretched back to the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon at the end of the Cameroon campaign of the First World War in 1916. In 1916, Anglo-French forces defeated Germany and ousted them from the Kamerun Protectorate. The territory was partitioned into two unequal halves; the British occupying a fifth constituted as British Cameroon and the French assuming four-fifths referred to as French Cameroun. When the war ended, the international community recognised the partition and requested Britain and France to administer their respective portions as mandate territories of the League of Nations. The new international boundary came to be called the Oliphant-Picot line in honour of Lancelot Oliphant, a British diplomat and George Picot a French diplomat who in a meeting in London in February 1916, initiated the partition by drawing a line on the map of Cameroon from Lake Chad to the Mungo River. The partition was finalised by the Milner-Simon Agreement of July 10, 1919.

The Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon gained additional international status when Britain further partitioned British Cameroons into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons and integrated the two portions into Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria respectively. In fact from 1922, the Oliphant-Picot line, with some cosmetic modifications, became the boundary between British Nigeria and French Cameroun because British Southern and British Northern Cameroons were integral parts of the British colony of Nigeria.

During this period, the territory was administered as part of the British colony of Nigeria and the people adopted some aspects of the British system of education, the common law judicial system and the Anglo-Saxon culture (Ndi,2005). This greatly alienated them from their "brothers" in French Cameroun who were introduced to the Napoleonic code and the highly centralised French system of administration. In 1960, French Cameroun gained independence as *La République du Cameroun* and in October 1961 the British Southern Cameroons gained independence by reunification with *La République du Cameroun*. The Federation created by this reunion was a multiparty state but in 1966 President Ahidjo used shrewd diplomacy to convince Foncha, Muna and Endeley to dissolve their political parties and accompany Ahidjo's *Union Camerounaise* (UC) to form a Grand National Party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU) (Ngoh, 1996:240). This marked the end of multiparty democracy and the

highly cherish Anglo-Saxon practice of parliamentary democracy. In 1972, the Federation was abolished and a unitary state with all institutions centralised in Yaounde created. In 1984 the new President of the United Republic of Cameroon, Paul Biya renamed the country The Republic of Cameroon (La Republique du Cameroun), the name French Cameroun had before the 1961 reunification. The Anglophones of the former Southern Cameroons treated this constitutional reform and others since 1961 as assimilations. Even Biya's creation of Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) in Bamenda, March 1985, to replace the CNU did not seem to usher in any hope for Anglophones in a Republic dominated demographically and politically by Francophones

It was with this background that some Anglophone activists took advantage of the economic malaise and social distress in Cameroon in the late 1980s to reflect on the formation of a party that could protect the Anglophone identity or Anglophone interest in a demographically and politically Francophone dominated Cameroon.

One of the Anglophone activist who suffered persecution from the Yaounde regimes and who founded the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone secessionist group, Albert Mukong was the first to make the move towards the creation of the SDF. He contacted Dr Lawrence Fomambuh and Dr Siga Asanga who recommended John Fru Ndi as an ally in the struggle for Anglophone liberation (Mbah, 2018:16). The first Albert Mukong- Fru Ndi contact resulted in the decision to create a party. This coincided with Anglophone students protest against discrimination in the University of Yaounde and the circulation of their protest letters in the Anglophone Provinces. Carlson Anyangwe and Clement Ngwasiri all university dons joined the team. The first formal meeting of the founding fathers held on November 11, 1989 in Bamenda. At the meeting, Mukong lamented on the plight of Anglophones in Cameroon (Mbah, 2018:17). On December 1, 1989, Dr Siga Asanga hosted the second meeting in Yaounde. On February 17, 1990 the third meeting held in Fru Ndi's residence in Bamenda. During this meeting Albert Mukong suggested that the party was to be the legal face of the SCNC (Mbah, 2018:21). In March 1990, a file was submitted to government requesting the authorisation of the Social Democratic Front. The founding father again met at Nyo'o Wakia's residence to finalise plan for the launch of the party and on May 26, 1990, the SDF was launched. The launching rally was banned but the courageous John Fru Ndi went ahead to defy state authority and the military to proclaim the birth of his party.

The Anglophone Grievances

The political grievances were centred on the gradual disrespect for the federal constitution and the denigration and assimilation of Anglophones adopted by the Ahidjo and Biya governments instead of safeguarding the cultural peculiarities West Cameroon, In fact, Ahidjo was empowered by the federal constitution to rule by decrees. In order to obscure the federal structure and make it ineffective, in 1962 he signed a presidential decree dividing the federation into six administrative units and each placed under a federal inspector (Fanso,2009:10) West Cameroon constituted one of the administrative units. The federal inspector was directly accountable to Ahidjo and this undermined the powers of the Prime Minister and authority of the federated states especially that of West Cameroon. The federal system was dismantled in 1972 following the referendum. This was an insult to the Anglophones who saw their state divided into two provinces. In 1984, Ahidjo's successor Paul Biya changed the name of the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon. This angered the Anglophones because this was the name French Cameroon adopted at independence. The Anglophone pressure groups accused the leadership of annexing them (Dinka, 1985).

Apart from these constitutional roots of the problem, Anglophones were never appointed to head strategic services like the Ministries of Territorial Administration, Defence, Education, Finance, *Societe Nationale de Raffinage* (SONARA), and *Societe Nationale des Hydrocarbures* (SNH). To confirm the secondary position of the Anglophones in Cameroon, Joseph Takougang asserts that "37 of the 47 Senior Divisional Officers in Cameroon in 1991 were Beti (Francophones) as were three-quarters of the Directors and General Managers of the parastatals, and 22 of the 38 high-ranking bureaucrats who had been appointed in the newly created office of Prime Minister." (Takougang, 1993)

The Yaounde regime was not accountable for the petroleum or crude oil exploitation in the Southwest coast of Cameroon and Anglophones were excluded from the management of this major source of national wealth. Moreover, they accuse the Yaounde regime of destroying the small scale enterprises in West Cameroon in favour of Francophone dominated institutions. The demise of West Cameroon Development Authority (WCDA), Cameroon Bank (CB) and Powercam was blamed on the Francophones (Ndobegang, 1992:4). The Anglophone business companies like Kilo and Bros, Nanga Company, Neba Ngu automobiles. Longla and Sons all suffered from unfair competition from firms in Douala and Yaounde. Even public economic institutions in Anglophone Cameroon like the Tiko Airport, Bali Airport and Victoria sea port, Wum Area Development Authority (WADA) etc collapse out of neglect

In the social domain, the University of Yaounde was bilingual in theory but in practice French was the dominant language. Anglophone students stagnated in this lone university because of the language barrier. There were

attempts by some French Cameroonian authorities to Frenchify the Anglophone General Examination Certificate (GCE) (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 213). In other cases there was discrimination in educational and training opportunities. Few Anglophones entered the School of Administration and Magistracy, the Combined Military Academy, The National Institute of Youths and Sports and the Advanced School of Engineering. In fact Anglophones had become second class citizens in their land of birth and the "wind of change" blowing in the world offered them an opportunity to create the SDF as their mouthpiece. The launch of the SDF was followed by the admission into the party of Anglophone militants and sympathisers from both the Northwest and Southwest provinces because the party was seen as an instrument for the defence of the Anglophone minority through secession or a two state federation.

SDF Relegates Anglophone Problems to the Background

Although the above narration indicates clearly that the SDF was conceived as a party to protect the Anglophones against perceived Francophone marginalisation and exploitation and to foster the struggle for secession, the party rapidly gained national status and acceptance in Francophone Cameroon. This was reflected in the results of the 1992 presidential elections widely believed by local and international observers to have been won by John Fru Ndi, the SDF candidate (Konings, 2004:2). Officially, the SDF candidate came second to the incumbent Paul Biya with 35.97 percent of the votes as against 39.98 percent for Paul Biya. The SDF candidate obtained very interesting scores in all the provinces defeating the incumbent Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM) candidate in the North West, West, South West and Littoral provinces. Unfortunately the SDF boycotted the legislative elections of 1992 in which the opposition parties, the National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP) of Belo Bouba Maigari, the Movement for the Defence of the Republic (MDR) of Diakole Diasala, and the *Unions des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) of Federick Kodock obtained a total of 92 seats against 88 for the ruling CPDM (Sobseh, 2012:143). In May 1997, the SDF obtained 43 seats in the legislative elections coming second to the CPDM with 109 seats. This was still an honourable score given the level of rigging organised by the ruling CPDM. The SDF therefore became the leading opposition force in the Assembly. With these initial achievements, the party gradually abandoned the initial dreams of the founding fathers. There were some reasons for the neglect of the Anglophone problem by the SDF

First, the charismatic leader of the SDF, John Fru Ndi who had the courage to brave the militarised Bamenda town to launch his party on May 26, 1990 was not a diehard militant of the Anglophone cause. He had not experienced the persecutions suffered by the likes of Albert Mukong and as such could sacrifice the SDF appeal for a return to the federal system of government. His charm also immediately seduced many people who attended his mass rallies in the major towns of Cameroon. His mastery and use of the Pidgin English was revolutionary in Cameroon politics at least east of the Mungo. Unlike other opposition leaders of the 1990s such as Bello Bouba Maigari, Adamu Ndam Njoya, Frederick Kodock, Diakole Diassala, Jean Jacques Ekindi who were former barons of the old regimes, John Fru Ndi was a commoner, a bookseller and his background won for him the sympathy of the masses all over Cameroon and he became a national rather than an Anglophone hero.

The social democratic message of the SDF seemed to be different from the authoritarian and neo-liberal economic policies of the ruling regime. The party advocated equality, redistribution of wealth and freedoms. In fact the launching speech of its founder, presented on May 26, 1990, the same day Martin Luther King several decades ago presented his famous "I have a Dream" had these promises;

"Today is the most significant day in the struggle for democracy in Cameroon...Democracy has never been handed down to a people on a platter of gold... We have set as one of our goals to rid the Cameroonian society of a system that deprives people from being free men or otherwise punishing them for daring to think freely, associate freely, assemble peacefully and freely" (Gwellem, 1996:12)

These declarations attracted the radical intelligentsia, middle class, teachers and lawyers to the party. As a result, the party rapidly expanded its organs into the eight Francophone provinces and by 1996 the party had more Francophone militants and sympathisers than the Anglophones. This popularity could not have been sacrificed.

Apart from the attractiveness of the declarations, the launch of the SDF was made more popular by the government that banned it, the military that shot and killed 6 sympathisers at 'liberty square' and the official press that lied that the '6 martyrs' were trampled to death and not killed by soldiers. Derogatory statements were also made by important government officials. For instance, Emah Basile, the Government Delegate for the Yaounde City Council described Anglophones as "enemies in the house" (Ngoh, 1996:308). The NUDP, MDR, UPC or even the Cameroon Democratic Union (CDU) of Adamu Ndam Njoya and the Progressive Movement (PM) of Jean Jacques Ekindi and other parties did not benefit from this 'publicity'.

John Fru Ndi also marketed his party through simplified, pidginised and easily understood slogans. "Power to the people and equal opportunities for all" and "Suffer don finish" meaning the end of hardship were captivating slogans for people who had suffered tribalism, nepotism, exclusion, unemployment and high cost of living for decades. The

general distress and discontent and the disappointment with the ruling oligarchy pushed many Cameroonians into the SDF wagon. The new comers, especially the Bamileke militants came with enough money and charmed the Chairman John Fru Ndi.

The SDF wagon therefore became too full with the Bamileke of the West, Fulbe of the Grand North, Sawa of the Coast and some Fang Beti of the Grand South. Consequently John Fru Ndi relegated the appeal for a two state federation and the SCNC call for separation to the background. Many disappointed Anglophones had to leave the already "polluted wagon".

The SDF-SCNC Divorce and the departure of Secessionists/Federalists

It did not take many years for disappointed Anglophones to start departing from the SDF. Those who saw the party as the mouthpiece of the SCNC or as the legal organ of the SCNC were probably not familiar with the 1990 *SDF Manifesto* and the 1991 *SDF Proposal on the Devolution of Power*, two documents which stressed on the importance of national unity (Konings, 2004:9)

The first group to be disappointed were militants from the South West who did not only expect to be given prominent positions in the party, but also to see the party fight for a two state federation. They were rather served with a Northwest-West regions domination of the party. Consequently a good number of them quietly left the SDF and joined the South West Elite Association (SWELA) created by A T Enaw in 1991 as a response to the new national status of the SDF (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 1998:327). SWELA at birth was therefore federalist, anti-centrist and anti-Francophone. Later in 1991 the Yaounde regime penetrated the association rendering it more anti-SDF but pro-CPDM. It was under the influence of Yaounde that SWELA in September 1991 advocated for a 10 states federation.

At the SDF Convention of 1993 in Bafoussam, the members of the SCNC, militants of the party requested that the party should pronounce officially in favour of the two states federation but the party hierarchy ignored the appeal. On August 22, 1994, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the SDF meeting in Bamenda declared in favour of a 4 states federation (Konings, 2004:10). This was a kind of compromise between the Anglophone and Francophone interests within the party. A compromise that failed to please the Anglophone extremists.

In 1993 and 1994, there were two important Anglophone gatherings in Buea and Bamenda respectively. During these All Anglophone Conferences, the political elite called for a return to federalism (Buea Declaration, ACC1). The SDF rejected secession and proposed, in the context of Francophone opposition to a two-state federation, a four-state federal system. This was judged to be ambiguous by some Anglophone militants who in 1995 formed movements calling for two-state federation or secession.

In June 1995, the SDF again reaffirmed its stand on national unity when it organised a convention in Maroua in Francophone Cameroon. The same year the SCNC visited New York and London on a sensitisation tour and the Anglophones to show their commitment to federation or even separation reserved a hilarious welcome to the SCNC delegation upon return to Bamenda.

In 1996, when the SCNC leaders proposed boycotting the Municipal elections, claiming that any elections called by the Francophone-dominated state were irrelevant to and independent Southern Cameroon State, the SDF again ignored and participated in the elections. This alienated many diehard federalists from the party

The climax of the SDF rejection of its Anglophone origins and Anglophone emancipation mission came in 2000. On December 30, 1999, Frederick Alobwede Ebong took over radio Buea and declared the Independence of Southern Cameroon. The SDF frowned at the act and at a party meeting on May 6, 2000, Nfor Ngala Nfor, Martin Luma, Albert Mukong, Carlson Anyangwe and all the SCNC activists who supported Ebong's declaration of Independence were expelled or asked to resign from the party. On May 7, 2000 Chairman John Fru Ndi openly confessed that the SDF was not supporting the cause and strategies of the SCNC reaffirming that a 4 state federation was the panacea to the Anglophone problem. This was followed with the SDF participation in the national unity day, May 20, 2000 at the chagrin of the SCNC. Many militants' sympathisers of the SCNC resigned.

On January 11, 2006, Lydia Efimba Belle, a member of NEC from Kumba resigned accusing the SDF of tribalism and neglect for Anglophone grievances. Many other South westerners followed her and in the May 2007 legislative elections, the SDF lost in all the Southwest constituencies except Lebialem. The party continued to decline and in 2016, its problems increased as it continued to flirt with the Anglophone problem.

SDF and the New Anglophone Separatists

In the last quarter of 2016, the Anglophone problem gained fresh impetus with Lawyers and Teachers associations protesting against the "Francophonisation" of the courts, the Common Law and legal institutions in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, the denigration of English language and the appointment of French speaking teachers in Anglophone schools. The lawyers boycotted the courts and the teachers called for ghost schools. On November 8 and 10, 2016, Lawyers mobilised hundreds of people to protest in Bamenda and Buea respectively. On November

21, 2016, teachers and some sympathisers protested in Bamenda. When the government failed to address these grievances, they called for civil disobedience and the extremist joined them to call for separation and the restoration of the State of Southern Cameroons or Ambazonia. The SDF seem to have underestimated the new spirit of the protest and John Fru Ndi suffered humiliation as the crowd booed at him as he attempted to calm down the November protesters.

In the absence of an official SDF reaction to the radicalisation of the new Anglophone nationalism, Hon. Joseph Wirba of the SDF from the Anglophone Northwest Region delivered his now famous liberation speech in parliament on December 13, 2016. He spoke against violent repression, brutality, killings and the excesses of the military in Anglophone Cameroon. He accused the government of treating Anglophones as slaves concluding that “when injustice becomes the law, resistance becomes a duty” (Tembon, 2018:7). The Anglophone nationalists expected the Wirba speech to be followed by concrete declarations from the party hierarchy but the party chairman instead ignored the incident. Even Wirba’s fellow SDF MPs who sang the national anthem and left the house after his speech, later returned for normal parliamentary business as if nothing had happened.

Wirba’s stance indicated a division within the SDF between the more radical group that called for a two-state federation and a more traditional group that wanted the four-state federation or for the most moderate, effective decentralisation. John Fru Ndi again tried to comfort the two factions. First, in early January 2017, he organised SDF party rallies in Bamenda and Buea declaring that the SDF stood firmly with the Anglophone leaders and the Southern Cameroon people in ensuring that West Cameroonians gain back their legal, educational and political system (Agbaw-Ebai, 2017). Few days later on January 12, 2017, he appointed, for the first time, a Francophone in the person of Jean Tsomelou, as SDF chief scribe (The Median, 2017). This appointment was ill-timed and was not welcomed by Anglophone nationalist who for long had seen the post of SDF scribe reserved for Anglophones just like that of the rival Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) was reserved for Francophones. Many nationalist began to see the SDF as an enemy movement and betrayer of the Anglophone cause. As a result of these accusations, the SDF made a symbolic rapprochement with the Anglophone activists by not attending the May 20, 2017 march in solidarity with Anglophone detainees. This did not change anything as the SDF still insisted on the four-state federation much to the chagrin of the Anglophones.

As the SDF remained reluctant to declare for separation and the restoration of the State of Southern Cameroon, Ambazonia, activists in the diaspora instructed the armed groups that were already kidnapping and torturing the opponents of secession, to capture and torture SDF flagbearers including John Fru Ndi. On April 25, 2019, John Fru Ndi was abducted by separatist fighters. On June 28, 2019 he was again kidnapped and detained for 48 hours. His abductors wanted him to cause all SDF Senators, MPs and Mayors to resign from their offices and position within 24 hours because these SDF officials were “disturbing their cause” (Loh, 2019). The Chairman was liberated because he promised to organise a meeting with the elected representatives of the SDF to examine their injunction.

At the Major National Dialogue organised by President Biya and coordinated by Premier John Ngute, in 2019, the SDF having lost its Francophone and Anglophone sympathisers as reflected in the 2017 Presidential and 2018 Senatorial elections, called for a two-state federation. Too little too late because the extremists who boycotted the dialogue asked for nothing short of separation. The SDF is dwindling in to oblivion because of its inconsistency, flirtation, ambiguity and dillydallying attitude vis-à-vis the Anglophone struggle.

Conclusion

The majority of the founding fathers sacrificed time, money and energy for the SDF dreaming that the new party will serve as the best medium for the propagation of the idea of a separate Southern Cameroons state. Unfortunately for them, the party had to be incarnated by John Fru Ndi who had nation ambitions. Consequently as early as 1991, Chairman John Fru Ndi and his acolytes did not hesitate to market the party in the Francophone Regions. Bamileke adherents with resources for the part rapidly outnumbered Anglophones. They were against and unfamiliar with the federal system. When the conflict between the Anglophone federalists and francophone centralists became unbearable within the party, Fru Ndi opted for a four state federation and appointed a Francophone to the prestigious post of SDF chief scribe at the peak of the Anglophone disgruntlement. Violence erupted from 2017 and SDF militants including the chairman himself was kidnapped and tortured at several instances. When Biya summoned the Major National Dialogue

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