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Contemporary aspects of a bureaucratic hold-up of city governance in Cameroon

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This paper is designed to establish a set of empirical arguments derived from the 22 July 2004 decentralization guidelines in Cameroon, especially as these affect city governance in the country. The paper draws mainly on interviews of major administrative and political officials of the city of Kumba in the Southwest Region to argue that the decentralization guidelines designed to devolve powers to city councils in Cameroon has in-built structural impediments. These incoherent administrative and political obstacles have ironically contributed to a hold-up of effective participation by locally elected municipal authorities and city inhabitants in the process of local democratization and participatory development. The implications of these hold-up on the broad process of political and administrative reforms in Cameroon are considered.

Key words: Bureaucracy, governance, decentralization, guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Administrative and political decentralization have recently emerged as high developmental strategies in Africa and elsewhere (Boone, 2003; Therkildsen, 2001). In the past three decades, African countries have to various degrees initiated reforms in governance at the local, regional, and national levels. Based on neoliberal assumptions, it was presumed both by local and international reform-minded institutions such as the World Bank and a broad range of civil society organizations that these reforms were going to lead to popular-political participation, especially of grassroots populations. In this way, it was hoped governments could become more responsible, responsive, and accountable to their citizens. These contemporary reforms aimed at re-inventing and re-engineering government and restructuring the state gradually became a global model affecting countries around the world (Haque, 2004). These reforms came in the wake of widespread failures of hitherto interventionist developmental states in Africa and elsewhere which were deemed no longer propitious for economic development and democratic governance (Memfih, 2008; Olowu,

2003). The failure of centralized public sector management became evident in political, fiscal, and economic crises. These problems combined in various ways to challenge both the monopoly of the economy and the political base enjoyed by African regimes. The good governance agenda associated with inclusive governance and poverty reduction in Africa were among the principal leitmotifs for these reforms (Widner, 1994; Obeng-Odoom, 2009) to which many states in the region grudgingly complied (Joseph, 2007).

It is in this broad local and international context that Cameroon initiated its own decentralization drive. In keeping with the now fashionable and largely internationally induced quest especially by multilateral funding agencies for a reduced role of the state, the government did embark on a process of devolving political, economic, and administrative powers to the local level. The World Bank in particular drew on the proximity principle of decentralization as one of the causes of these reforms. It argued that by reducing informational asymmetries between those in power and those governed; decentralization should induce a higher accountability of governments and lead to efficiency in public spending (Caldeira et al., 2010). These reform processes in Cameroon coincided more or less with

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major political and economic shifts in Africa pushed through by a combined constellation of local and international pressures for changes in state political and economic structures within the framework of the neo-liberal dispensation. These reforms were ostensibly designed to encourage participation by grassroots populations in local political and economic development. Decentralization, as many other contemporary administrative reforms in Africa, is basically about inducing changes in power relations between state and society, between politicians and bureaucrats, and between government organizations. As will be seen in the case of Cameroon, these reforms go 'to the heart of who governs' (Bekke et al., 1996: 6, in: Therkildsen, 2001: 2) and is the source of numerous administrative and political conflicts between different stakeholders and actors of the decentralization drive in Cameroon.

In studying this process, the focus of this paper is on Cameroon's decentralization guidelines of July 2004, (henceforth, the guidelines) especially as these apply to local municipal councils in the country. Based on interviews of major administrative and political officials such as sub-divisional mayors and divisional officers of the city of Kumba in the Southwest Region of Cameroon between the months of February and June 2010, this paper examines how these guidelines are actually implemented. It also examines the different role of actors in city council administration, and the impact of these decentralization measures on popular participation. On the basis of this case study, the paper broadly concludes that the decentralization drive embarked upon by the government of Cameroon is fused with, and supportive of an illiberal political and administrative dynamics of a national character. This conclusion is informed by persistent structural and political obstacles which do not bode well for effective decentralization and participatory governance at the local level. Because decentralization is an on-going process in Cameroon, this paper could be considered a provisional statement on some of its most recent outcomes.

CAMEROON'S DECENTRALIZATION GUIDELINES: AN OVERVIEW

Cameroon formally embarked on the decentralization project following Law No. 2004/17 of July 2004 on Decentralization. Generally speaking, these laws were meant to transfer some responsibility from the central to local governments in order to enhance efficiency, democracy, accountability of public institutions, as well as improve the responsiveness of state agencies to local needs. The general provision of the guidelines explicitly states that "decentralization shall consist of devolution by the state of special powers and appropriate resources to regional and local authorities." The goals, the guidelines continue, is to endow regional and local authorities "with administrative and financial autonomy, to promote

economic, social, health, educational, cultural, and sports development in their respective areas of jurisdiction." Finally, "regional and local authorities shall be administered freely by elected boards under conditions laid down by the law." According to government sources (The Post, No. 0855 Friday, 27 April, 2007: 1), the recent creation of new administrative sub-divisions and local councils in Cameroon translates the governments commitment to bring administration closer to the people. The immediate trickle down effect would mean that people will no longer travel long distances to solve their various administrative problems, or have their documents certified. Also, local people will be involved in various development decisions that directly affect them. A close reading of the guidelines tacitly endorses decentralization as the legal, institutional, and financial means through which local and regional authorities operate to foster development and give voice to the population. In this way, it is assumed by proponents of decentralization, citizens will be economically and socially empowered. (Cheka, 2007). Article 55 of the 1996 constitution of Cameroon which gives impetus to decentralization at local and regional levels announces that "decentralized local entities of the republic shall be regions and councils...decentralized local authorities shall be legal entities recognized by public law. They shall enjoy administrative and financial autonomy in the management of local interests. They shall be freely administered by boards elected in accordance with conditions laid down by law" (Cameroon Constitution 1996). Broadly speaking, this constitutional framework is the basis for the on-going decentralization of municipal councils and regions in Cameroon. The practice of having local governments that are elected directly by universal suffrage theoretically implies that locally elected leaders such as mayors will be accountable and answerable to their local constituencies. The provisions of the guidelines are important benchmarks for democracy and good governance so much embraced in official circles in Cameroon.

From the above policy information contained in both the constitution and the guidelines, the provisions of the Guidelines are in tandem with the general spirit of decentralization. Ribot (2002:2) has argued that decentralization is about creating a realm of local autonomy defined by inclusive local processes and local authorities empowered with decisions and resources that are meaningful to local people. These advantages could promote and encourage economic development and reduce poverty (Smoke, 2003), a favourite rationale and national slogan for decentralization in Cameroon today. It is in this connection that Olowu (2001) sees decentralization as the deliberate and planned transfer of resources away from central state institutions to peripheral institutions. As aforementioned, this policy option has been in vogue in developing countries because of the limitations and inability demonstrated by

centralized and authoritarian bureaucratic states to be economically efficient and politically responsive to the social and economic needs of their population. Using local-central relations within the broad context of poverty reduction in Africa, Crook (2003) argues that the degree of responsiveness by grassroots to decentralization initiatives is largely determined by the general regime context, particularly the ideological commitment of central political authorities. As the Cameroon case study will indicate, elite capture of local power structures appears to have been facilitated by the inherently contradictory and bureaucratic nature of the guidelines.

Because of the complexity and all-embracing nature of decentralization (Smoke, 2003), this paper is purposely limited to a discussion of the decentralization experience of the city of Kumba in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. This is done in the broad canvas of current decentralization efforts at both local and regional levels. Practice and outcome is privileged over discourse and expectations so as to effectively assess if these reforms actually lead to the outcomes desired.

CITY OF KUMBA: ONE SHIP, MANY CAPTAINS

In 2007, three sub-Divisional administrative and political areas were carved out from the former single unit that oversaw the administrative and political workings of the city of Kumba. Three sub-divisional council areas (local councils) were also created coinciding with the territorial and politico-administrative boundaries of the three sub-divisions. This districting of the city of Kumba saw three sub-divisions and three local council areas. These arrangements were theoretically designed to bring administration closer to the people, to improve service delivery, efficiency, governance, and accountability of the entire municipality. It was also to ensure participation by the population in matters that directly affect them. Following municipal elections of that year, that is, 2007, each of the council areas is currently run by an elected mayor assisted by municipal councilors. Each council area is under the supervisory authority of an appointed sub-divisional officer (DO) who acts as government watchdog over the activities of the local council. The three sub-divisional officers in Kumba are in turn responsible to a senior divisional officer (SDO) who is appointed by the president of the republic to oversee the activities of the entire administrative and political division. In addition to these administrative arrangements, there is also a state-appointed administrator, or Government delegate (GD) to the Kumba city council who is technically, as will be seen shortly, the principal administrator of the city. The government delegate lords it over all the three elected mayors of the sub-divisional councils or local councils of the city.

As far as the decentralization guidelines in Cameroon is applied to cities with sub-divisional councils such as

Kumba, section 2: (1) states that, "the council shall be the basic decentralized local authority, and the council is chaired by a mayor and elected councilors." In the case of Kumba, the three sub-divisional councils constitute the city council, and the divisional mayors are ex officio members of the city council. Section 124 of the guidelines stipulates that "the setting up of a city council (such as Kumba) shall entail the transfer of sub-divisional councils of powers and resources to the said city council, in accordance with the provision of this law." In this provision, decisions of sub-Divisional Councils shall not contradict those of the city council. And section 125: (3) of the guidelines adds that the city council is the supervisory authority of the sub-divisional councils. This administrative arrangement applies to all cities in Cameroon that come under what is officially described as special regime councils such as kumba. These special regime councils applies to cities with sub-divisional council areas or local council areas in Cameroon. Contrary to expectations, the overarching authority of an appointed government delegate seriously restricts and curtails the financial and political autonomy of the sub-divisional council areas.

Questioned on the experiences and actual functioning and problems associated with the current decentralization project in Cameroon, especially as this applies to cities like Kumba with sub-divisional councils supposedly run by elected mayors, and imposed government delegates who are answerable to the center, the district officer for Kumba 1 sub-division (who is appointed as government representative in the Kumba 1 council area) points to the conflict of authority inherent in the decentralization project. This is especially seen in conflicts between the government delegate to the city of Kumba (who is appointed by decree) and the mayors of the sub-divisional councils (who are elected by direct universal suffrage). According to the district officer, the guidelines duplicate the duties of the city council and those of the sub-divisional councils. The district officer specifically refers to Section 15 :(2) of the guidelines which states that, "powers devolved upon local authorities by the state shall not be exclusive. They shall be exercised concurrently by the state and the authorities under terms and conditions provided for by law" (our emphasis). Section 125: (2) of the guidelines adds that in all cases of consultations, decisions of sub-divisional councils shall not contradict those of the city council; adding in Section 125 :(3) that where a sub-divisional council takes a decision repugnant to that of a city council, the decision of the sub-divisional council in question shall automatically be null and void. From a close reading of these provisions contained in the guidelines, this is a clear indication that the government delegate to the Kumba city council is in charge of the entire municipality. In fact, mayors of the three sub-Divisional Council areas of the city of Kumba are ex-officio members of the city council, and each sub-divisional council designates

councilors to represent it on the city council during meetings.

In the same vein, the district officer (DO) for Kumba 11 sub-division argues that while the creation of sub-divisional councils in Kumba and in other towns and cities in Cameroon such as Douala and Yaoundé could potentially have been beneficial in terms of decentralization intended to scale up development at the local level, the overarching influence of imposed government delegates effectively dwarfs the authority of democratically elected mayors and councilors. The activities of these elected local officials are overseen by representatives of a supervisory authority, that is, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization personified in appointed Government Delegates, Senior District Officers, and District Officers (at the level of councils) and Governors (in the case of regions). Decentralization, the DO for Kumba 11 points out, is in name only as the government delegate actually controls the elected mayors of the sub-divisional councils. This, the District Officer argues, saps the mobilizing potential of the population who, on many occasions refused to participate in local development initiatives such as the Keep Kumba clean campaign, as the local hygiene and sanitation drive of the city of Kumba is called. This probably explains why life in the city is dominated by squalid environmental conditions, sanitation crisis; and the collapsing infrastructure has failed to keep pace with the growing population. These administrative problems have added to the generally poor and weak urban economic infrastructure to which imposed local administrative and political elites have not been able to provide adequate solutions.

It is observed that the "Keep Kumba Clean" campaign is not effective because the population is generally ignored in the conception and implementation of local governance proceedings. Their non-participation in such local development drives could be seen as a form of resistance to the dominant authorities of imposed officials (such as the government delegate) contrary to the concrete democratic aspirations of citizens expressed through free and democratically elected mayors and councilors. This form of resistance appears to be illustrative of the political and developmental constraints within the city as these undemocratic institutions have failed dismally to grasp the local political economy within which they operate. The Kumba experience could be replicated in towns and cities in Cameroon that have been brought under the so-called special regime councils (with appointed government delegates who, technically administer cities) where, the central government has unilaterally imposed state administrators on local governing structures. These essentially top-down or horizontal approach to decentralization in Cameroon means popularly elected mayors of the various sub-divisional councils within the country, and of the city of Kumba in particular, have seen their powers usurped by

externally imposed officials such as government delegates. These imposed officials owe political allegiance to a central authority, and not to the local population of these towns and cities.

In addition to this bureaucratic and political hold-up, the role of district officers of the various sub-divisional councils of the city of Kumba has further polarized the municipality, since they are the immediate supervisory authorities of local councils (known as divisional councils in Cameroon). These district officers are answerable to a senior district officer who is the supervisory authority not only of the divisional council areas, but of the Kumba city council as well. As the divisional mayor for Kumba 11 Council Area sees it, the activities of the sub-Divisional Councils are actually between a rock and a hard place. These different supervisory authorities within the city have stifled all efforts by locally elected mayors to truly initiate and carry out meaningful development within their councils. It is clear this kind of cumbersome and incoherent administrative arrangement implies that none of these appointed officials is answerable to local mayors who are the direct representative of the people, and by implication, none is answerable to the local population and the public at large. In the case of Kumba, this has created many administrative hurdles and bottlenecks due to internal administrative and political wrangling between the different offices. This breeds corruption in the process as these officers are only responsible to their parochial and selfish material interest as well as of those officials at the centre who imposed them in those positions in the first place (Mbuagbo and Orock, forthcoming).

According to the district officer for Kumba 11 sub-division, the confusion and source of tension between the various authorities within the Kumba city council can partly be explained by the very contradictory nature of the decentralization project. To this should be added the existence of very few income generating facilities within the city. This has occasioned fierce competition between the city council and the sub-divisional councils over who controls what facility and for what purpose. while the guidelines stipulates that sub-divisional councils and the city council have as general mission the promotion of local development so as to improve the living conditions of inhabitants, which authority, then, is actually responsible for the welfare of citizens of the city of Kumba? Where does the authority of the sub-divisional councils end and where does the city council take over? It is in this respect that the first deputy mayor of Kumba 1 council area alludes to conflict of interest embedded in the chaotic local bureaucracy, especially where the functions of the city council clash with those of the sub-divisional councils. The deputy mayor cites the management of the public cemetery, markets, bus stations, and slaughter houses (The Post, No. 0925, Monday, 28 January, 2008: 4). Such conflicts are exacerbated, especially in the context of a weak economic infrastructure defined by very limited income

generating facilities. This has occasioned fierce competition by local authorities over who controls what facility. Because the government delegate is appointed, and takes orders from the center, the district officer for Kumba 11 sub-division argues that major decisions for urban planning and development are designed and imposed from the national capital. The DO states that mayors should rather be given the opportunity to plan development needs, not the other way round. Local problems are better perceived and evaluated by local authorities, and relevant solutions could then be provided. As the district officer puts it, local problems require local solutions.

While such worries have been expressed by some administrators of the city of Kumba, the first deputy mayor of Kumba 1 council area thinks that a government delegate is however necessary and desirable to regulate the activities of the sub-divisional councils, and adds that if the sub-divisional councils of Kumba, for example, remain autonomous, it might lead to a situation where one part of the city develops more than the others. This situation, the deputy mayor argues, might cause several people to migrate from one part of the city to another. Such a prospect for unequal development is invoked to explain the regulatory authority of an appointed government representative, but it does fail to illuminate the political motives driving such intervention. The Kumba experience is a pointer to the general trend in the country, especially in cities with sub-divisional councils areas lorded over by imposed government delegates and other local administrative authorities who are basically answerable to the centre.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECENTRALIZATION PROJECT

From this brief sketch of the situation in Kumba, it could be argued with Boone (2003) that decentralization has not necessarily empowered local citizens in several African countries, but appears to have instead disempowered them by strengthening local power brokers or state agents. In Cameroon, the result is a highly interventionist state apparatus that remains under the tight control and destructive grip of administrative agents deployed by the state. This is personified in appointed government delegates and district officers whose overriding prerogative appears to be the maintenance of law and order, in the background of a dismal local economic and social crisis. The result of such interventionist policies is the institutionalization in bureaucratic, administrative, and political structures and practices that undermine the authority of locally elected council officials such as mayors and councilors (Obeng-Odoom, 2009). In this context, it is possible to draw on the decentralization experience in Nigeria (Vaughan, 1995) to explain that the decentralization move in Cameroon is revealed as essentially a means of

allocating patronage, and an instrument of political domination in local communities. In such politically informed local bureaucracy, the Government Delegate of the Kumba city council agrees that the collection of taxes is very difficult, though this remains the lifejacket of any city council if it is to remain financially viable to pursue development projects (The Post, May 26, 2003). But tax evasion is rampant as citizens and businesses within the city refuse to cooperate with local officials for obvious reasons. The generally unaccountable local bureaucracy of Kumba means citizen's attitude of non-payment is a strong marker of distrust and suspicion that fair procedure for revenue collection and distribution of services will prevail, especially as local administrative officials of the city are responsive to the demands of alien and superior authorities, and not to local realities.

Viewing decentralization from a larger, regional perspective, on November 12, 2008, a presidential decree transformed Cameroon's ten provinces into regions with the theoretical objective of bringing administration closer to the people. The purported objective of the decree was ostensibly designed to ensure greater participation by citizens in governance proceedings at regional levels (The Post No. 0855, Friday, 27, 2007: 1). But the said presidential decree No. 2008/376, contrary to expectations, makes it clear that these new administrative set-up is largely a replica of the status quo. In fact, the over centralization of powers in the hands of the president of the republic seem a stark reality of the so-called regionalism. Governors of regions who head these administrative units are, again, like in the past, appointed by the president of the republic, and are answerable to central state authorities. Reacting to the provision of the decree, an opposition member of parliament of the Social Democratic Front party (SDF) said the president of the republic has put governors above regional council presidents (who are yet to be elected, and who are de jure supposed to be the principal administrators of regions, as elected officials) because a careful reading of the decree makes it clear that presidents of regional councils, when finally elected, will take instructions from appointed governors (The Post, No.01004 of Friday, 21 November, 2008: 2). Such an interventionist spirit runs counter to the decentralization drive because local people are not given a chance to be administered by those on whom they have placed their trust through democratic elections. This could slow down development in many ways because appointed governors and district officers and government delegates render accounts of their stewardship only to the head of state, and not to the people of regions or municipalities. The Law on regions No. 2004/19 of 22 July 2004 clearly stipulates in Section 65 that "the president of the regional council shall be the chief executive of the region". With the current decree of November 2008, however, there will certainly be a tussle of authority between the appointed governor and the elected regional president. In order to

maintain the concentration of more powers in the hands of the president of the republic, Article 28 of the decree of November 2008 states emphatically that governors and senior district officers represent the head of state in their respective administrative units. This is a stark reminder of the ugly hand of government in manipulating local and regional power relations for purely political ends, as citizen's quest for democratic governance has been hijacked by imposed authorities.

The letter and spirit of decentralization as enshrined in the 1996 constitution of Cameroon provides for the effective devolution of powers in such a way that local communities will be empowered to manage their affairs. But Bayart et al. (2001) have linked the governments' meddling in the results of the 1996 municipal elections in Cameroon to the autochthonisation of politics through the imposition of Government Delegates, or state administrators in the governance structures (known as councils) of major towns and cities that were swept by opposition political parties. This was done, ostensibly, to protect indigenes of these towns and cities from being outvoted by strangers. These Government Delegates saw powers effectively transferred from democratically elected local officials, principally mayors and councilors, thereby truncating the democratic process, especially salient with issues of participatory self-governance at the local level. Aware of such undemocratic practices that characterize the on-going decentralization project in Cameroon, the deputy mayor of Kumba 11 sub-divisional council area is right to argue that Cameroonians embraced the decentralization project, hoping that it was going to usher in the dawn of a new era in which people in councils and regions will be given the opportunity to democratically elect their representatives. The deputy mayor contends that appointed officials rather strive to satisfy their masters and not the development needs of the people. "This is a terrible disappointment", notes the communication officer of a leading opposition political party in Cameroon, the Cameroon Democratic Union (CDU). The officer adds, "We did the framework for decentralization in which it was recommended that governors of regions be elected. But the president of the republic has instead concentrated more powers in his hands". Similarly, the executive director of Yaoundé-based human rights NGO, The foundation for human rights and development, dismissed the appointment of regional governors as an unconstitutional move, stating that Cameroon's 1996 constitution specifically provides for the election of regional councils headed by a president. Appointed governors, he argues, are alien to local realities because it fails to empower local populations towards development (The Post, No. 01004 of Friday, 21 November, 2008:2).

Such usurpation of local political power by imposed authorities actually undermines the authority of locally elected officials such as mayors and councilors. The fact that these state-appointed administrators are all militants

of the government political party, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Party (CPDM) leaves room to question that they will be impartial in their decisions and actions, especially as some of the divisional councils in Cameroon are run by opposition political parties. In the case of Kumba, this has led to an uneasy and tense relationship between the Government delegate and sub-divisional mayors that are of the opposition. This polarization does not bode well for effective coordination and dialogue between the different offices, and hampers development efforts of the entire city.

It is in pursuance of this interventionist drive in the management of local and regional affairs that the government of Cameroon did pass a bill in the National Assembly (Bill NO. 762/PJL/AN) in June 2004, which empowers appointed administrators such as regional governors, senior district officers, and district officers to veto decisions taken by locally elected officials (such as mayors, and eventually, presidents of regional councils). These appointed officials remain supervisory authorities of decentralized structures (such as local councils), and have authority to veto their decisions (www.cameroon-info.net/cin-reactions accessed on 26 July, 2004). The Bill adds in one of its provisions (Article 80) that the process of transferring authority to local levels, or decentralization, will be a progressive or gradual process, and that this will be on the strong recommendation of the National Council on Decentralization. Like several committees created in Cameroon, the National Council on Decentralization appears to enjoy the prerogative and leverage of determining not only the meaning to attach to the concept of decentralization, but also the extent to which powers could actually be devolved to local levels (www.lemessenger.net/details-articles accessed on 26 July, 2004).

A parallel situation can be established with the decentralization reforms in West Africa (Boone, 2003) where the political logic appears to dwarf the economic and welfare enhancing logic of administrative reforms, as governments are simply manipulating local power relations to their own advantage. Politics appears to emphasize the extractive nature of states, and also enhance the accumulative potency of local administrative and political officials. Vaughan (1995) illustrates the point in Nigeria where similar decentralization has actually strengthened the administrative center at the expense of local political expressions. This is sustained by a corrupt and inefficient local patronage system. Similarly in Indonesia, after more than thirty years under a highly centralized national government (Usman, 2001), the initial enthusiasm that accompanied the decentralization of forest administration in that country in late-1998 and early-1999 quickly petered out as the Ministry of Forestry adopted large regulatory measures in the year 2002 designed explicitly to rescind much of the authority over forest administration that had earlier been transferred to district governments. These measures amounted to a

process of recentralization (Barr et al., 2006).

On the basis of the Cameroon experience, we could draw from Olivier de Sardan (1999) corruption complex to illustrate the pervasive level of corruption as local administrative and political officials see the municipality of Kumba as a bottomless pit and infinite source from which resources can be extracted, even as the city operates in a resource constrained environment which hinders the ability of officials to improve service delivery. For example, the detective, a local newspaper, enumerates a catalogue of incidents related to massive embezzlement of funds amounting to several millions, while the inhabitants of the city continue to live in hazardous and debilitating sanitary conditions. In this same paper, the deputy mayor of Kumba 1 council area charges the mayor: "He wouldn't allow anyone but his wife to meddle with council finances, meant more for himself than for the people of Kumba 1 who elected him...the Kumba 1 council has no official van yet, but the mayor has consumed CFA 3 million Francs worth of fuel by February ending". (The Detective, Vol. 16, No. 2, April 17-30, 2008:

7) These negative tendencies widely reported in the local media seem so pervasive in the local and urban governance scheme in Cameroon, and the city of Kumba has been captured within the parochial and undemocratic nature of urban governance such that it has failed to serve as arena for civic engagement for sustainable urban development.

In addition to these almost generalized corrupt practices, the top-down reforms inscribed in the decentralization drive means these reforms are paradoxically directed and implemented by the very autocrats whom international and local reform-minded institutions and groups attacked (Bates, 1994; Therkildsen, 2001). It is therefore obvious that the domestic political impetus for effective decentralization is basically weak. Some reformers may not be seriously committed to reforms for ideological reasons, while others may resist reforms precisely because these aim to restrict their privileges and powers and diminish rent-seeking avenues. In Cameroon as in several African countries, while the economy appears to have witnessed substantial reforms in the nature of privatization of hitherto state-led corporations, the states dominance in the political realm has remained almost intact, with only cosmetic reforms (Nyamnjoh, 2002; Joseph, 2007) reflected in the timid decentralization drive. In spite of the assumed benefits of decentralization,

Wunsch (www.africa.ufi.edu/asq/v2/v2il.htm accessed on 23 June, 2010) suggests that the failure of African local democracy and governance is rooted in specific policy choices and strategies such as the deliberate withholding of resources from local entities for political reasons, and the long arm of the central government that thwarts the emergence of a truly democratic local governance pact.

While Boone (2003) has argued that recent decentralization efforts in Africa are taking place in a

context different than that of the immediate post-independence epoch that witnessed massive state intervention in political and economic development, the on-going decentralization experiment in Cameroon, however, indicates that the political complexion of state-society relations has not significantly been modified; if any thing, the states pre-eminence has been reinforced by the contradictory and politically informed decentralization project, while the rhetoric of national integration remains the states' overriding philosophy of governance. The current administrative reforms and changes are far from being seismic and revolutionary as was expected. Scott (2009) therefore notes that there is a vast chasm between the benefits of decentralization claimed by its proponents and effective service delivery. It was noted that the wide gap between officials and the community in the city of Kumba means local government is essentially atomistic and isolated, and not responsive to the needs of the local population. Imposed local authorities are more accountable to the center than to local citizens.

Equally important is the continuous obsession with the rhetoric of national integration that dominated the immediate post-independence political situation in a host of African countries. These early postcolonial years saw African leaders entrenching their powers so as to enhance the states' extractive capacities. In the specific case of Cameroon, opposition political parties were banned in favour of a single political party in 1966. The goal of such political moves it was argued was to foster national integration and unity in a multiethnic and pluralistic country (Mbuagbo, 2002). This necessarily led to authoritarian governance with which the government of Cameroon is still romancing. Because administrative and political reforms are always affected by the political context, the political economy determines the contours and complexion of decentralization. In this context, Hadiz (2004) explains that decentralization should examine local power relations, struggles and interest which are overlooked by neo-institutionalist perspectives, and argues that the Indonesian experience with decentralization points to the way in which institutions can be hijacked by a wide range of interests that may sideline those for whom decentralization is promoted. In the context of Cameroon, there is little incentive to actually decentralize, for as Olowu (2003) has argued, there is reluctance to share monopoly power, partly a throwback to the centralized form of governance inherited from colonial administrators. Hence Geschiere and Jackson (2006: 1-14) are right to argue that "these new developments have to be read against a longer historical background in which the colonial heritage played a complicated role." These connections between late colonial and post independence authoritarianism in Africa can be understood as an institutional legacy of late colonialism (Schneider, 2006; Sharp, 1997) which persists in timid decentralization moves. There are thus

strong linkages between the pre-reform and post-reform eras, and such historical continuities are traceable to the logic of national integration that still resonates and colours' national political decisions in Cameroon, and such historical legacies still hang on to complicate the present. This explains why so-called reforms appear to be ad hoc arrangements designed to reinforce the states grip on the local population. This apparent persistence of authoritarianism in the context of so-called reforms in Cameroon is an indication that political liberalization without democratization of political institutions and rules of the political game (Nasang'o, 2007) are strangely enough not mutually exclusive.

CONCLUSION

This work largely agrees with the views of Smoke (2003:7) that while decentralization is theoretically desirable, it is often resisted by local authorities for purely political reasons, and could actually be a political ploy by elites to expand their control through developing new local institutions and reformulating and refurbishing existing ones. The Cameroon case study has illustrated that weak institutional capacities have utterly failed to promote inter-or intra-institutional collaboration. This has actually hampered the development and cultivation of a broadly inclusive political process at the local level. While a measure of supervision of higher authorities is important, especially in a context where local decentralization actors are not well educated on the complicated mechanics of the process, Cameroons' decentralization is taking place in a climate devoid of information and education. It has not been able to induce the necessary behavioural changes which are critical; and the alienation of local city residents means that they are not convinced the city council will respond to their needs. Hence their failure to be fully involved in local development drives. Deep political and administrative reforms based on a realistic social engineering that takes on board the local political culture are required if the process of decentralization in Cameroon is to move from the phase of political sloganeering to a broad-based inclusive local governance scheme. As it stands, politically imposed local authorities are accountable to themselves, and to influential national or central political elites who appointed and imposed them in those positions in the first place. This explains why there are no genuine attempts by the state at creating local and viable consultative organs at the local level, but relies on hand picked surrogates of the central government essentially geared towards control of local inhabitants, while the extractive goals of localized elites and their backers could conveniently go unperturbed. The implication is a situation where these imposed officials are operating in tandem with regional and national elites to hijack the smooth and efficient running of cities in Cameroon. This

lack of coordination of actors involved in the decentralization project is illustrated in the failure to build effective and efficient linkages among the components of decentralization at the national, intergovernmental and local levels (Smoke, 2003: 13).

This paper has demonstrated that the current mode of administration of the urban space in Cameroon raises important questions of political representation and participation through a close scrutiny of what actually happens in the city of Kumba. There is therefore a wide gulf between what cities in Cameroon are expected to do under the timid decentralization drive in order to become viable political and economic entities, and what they are actually doing. Because the central state itself is yet to undergo meaningful political and administrative reforms in form and content under the now stalled democratization option (Mbaku, 2002; Joseph, 2007), contemporary decentralization reforms within the country should be understood within a wider framework of a weak domestic impulse to reform. As illustration of this weakness, the government of Cameroon promised that the last phase of the decentralization process was going to be effective from January 2010 (The Sun, Friday November 6, 2009). This promise has not been translated into concrete reality.

The population of the city of Kumba is not known. The results of a national census conducted in 2005 are yet to be made public. It is however estimated by various local authorities of the municipality to range between 700.000 and 1.000.000. Opposition political parties have accused the government of deliberately withholding figures of the census for purely political reasons.

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