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Manifestations of Gratitude to Governmental Authorities: A Way of Political Life in Cameroon under the Biya Regime

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Abstract:

In the growing body of literature, research shows that gratitude can be recognized as a manifestation of political power that binds political actors in moral contracts. This article aims to discuss the manifestations of gratitude to governmental authorities, in Cameroon under the Biya regime through the adoption of a scientific approach. Cameroon is a plural society dominated by a strong political hierarchy where recognition of political authorities and parties are unevenly enforced and where the practice of gratitude is lacking but extremely significant when displayed.

Keywords: *Gratitude, political/governmental authorities, Cameroon, Biya regime, political gratitude, science of gratitude*

1. Introduction

Gratitude is not only a way of social and spiritual life¹; it is also a way of political life. Political life is characterised by the fulfilment of two functions: allocation of values for society and the induction of members of society to accept those allocations as binding, at least for most of the time.² Although gratitude has been considered and accepted as a common social practice, its recurrent usage in the political realm prompts us to investigate its political value by identifying and analysing its political functions if at all. Indeed, manifestation of gratitude has been found to be important for the quality of political life.

Cameroon is an emerging economy within the Central African region but political issues have been threatening the country's economic growth recently. During the start of the Biya regime, Cameroon was suffering from economic and political instability and people believed that the quickest way to benefit and ascend to power under this regime is to manifest gratitude to the head of the state.³ The need for understanding the practice of gratitude to the Cameroonian government by various factors such as political parties, members of civil society, civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, private as well as public institutions etc. is grounded on exploring whether the manifestations of gratitude to Cameroonian government authorities can help in reducing declines in political participation and social integration, hence system survival. This is based on the notion that the practice of gratitude creates positive emotions that contributes to broadening people's mode of thinking towards their creative consideration of various actions that may be beneficial to others.⁴

This paper argues that political systems also survive because people manifest political gratitude to its ruling elite. A manifestation of gratitude to the ruling elite is perceived more or less as a political resource in political systems where resources might not only be scarce but are redistributed sometimes along selective lines. Individuals and groups in society who manifest gratitude to governmental authorities may be acting as if they are grateful but indeed, the act in itself represents an act of appreciation that makes sense politically. Being in a grateful mood in the political world is expressing a favour obtained from ruling elites, who, themselves need gratitude to develop a feeling of political fulfilment. Users of political gratitude do so with the belief that governmental 'favour' is bound to come back to them and come back multiplied. That is also the strategic dimension of manifestation of gratitude that cannot be ignored in the political world. The Biya regime is still in power partly because of the manifestation of gratitude shown to his government and regime. This research aims to discuss the manifestations of gratitude to governmental authorities in Cameroon under the Biya regime through the adoption of a systems approach to political life.

¹ For details on gratitude as a way of spiritual and social life, see, Hay, Louise L and Friends (1996) *Gratitude: A way of life*, Carlshad, California; Hay House.

² Easton (1996:194)

³ (Harrijvan and Weerdesteijn, 2020; Welle, 2020).

⁴ Allen, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Studies about gratitude have been growing in pursuit of expanding the science and practice of gratitude in different research interests such as in the workplace, in learning and in creating good relationships among others. For example, Wilson (2016) suggests that the practice of gratitude has a positive impact on learners' focus and resilience in learning.⁵ Yet, there are limited studies focusing on the science of gratitude in the political arena.

Can we consider the virtue of gratitude as a social glue that reinforces the personal, social, professional, political and diplomatic relationships? In answering this question, it is important to consider why several people have been expressing and manifesting gratitude in different ways. Gratitude, as proposed by Allen (2018), means different things to different people in different contexts. For example, some people consider gratitude as a virtue while others see it as positive behaviour.⁶ The same authors further explained that there are different social and cultural factors linked to gratitude.⁷ Yet, how can the manifestation of gratitude be viewed in context of political scientific research?

Cameroon is an emerging economy within the African continent. It is a republic that is dominated by the presidency or the head of the state which is currently under the Biya regime (usembassy.gov, 2020). According to the same author, while in pursuit of economic growth, the Cameroonian government's recognition of political parties and/or authorities is unevenly enforced. In response to this, the same author asserted that Biya resorted to promising a new deal to improve political and economic situation but failed (Harrijvan and Weerdesteijn, 2020). Until recently, Cameroonians had believed Biya to be invisible during crises such as the Anglophone crisis and the Covid-19 crisis (Welle, 2020). This view has had broader impacts on the decline of Cameroon's political and socioeconomic conditions and transformation (shown in figure 1) (BTI Transformation Index, 2020).



Figure 1: Cameroon Country Report, 2020 (BTI Transformation Index, 2020)

When former Cameroon president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, resigned from presidency in November of 1982, he was succeeded by Paul Biya, who ascended the presidency of Cameroon without any constituency of his own.⁸ From the time Biya started his term, he was faced with several challenges, one of which is the orchestration of Ahidjo to return to power. Since his rise to power in November 1982, Biya has survived all challenges making his authority that much stronger. As president, Biya provided his regime with ideological foundations and reinforced the political system allowing him to retain power until the time of this writing. As Cameroon is still facing political conflicts and the ongoing Anglophone crisis, it is a generally believed Biya has been leading Cameroonians through various predicaments despite being accused of having dysfunctional regime.⁹

It is now also generally believed Biya's regime strategy is to keep power at all cost, by all means resulting to the establishment of units to serve as the state's repressive apparatus.¹⁰ As explained by the same author, the regime in Cameroon remains to be presidentialist which means that the president follows discretionary appreciation of the governmental authorities. According to Sara Algoe's find-remind-and-bind theory of gratitude, 'gratitude helps people

⁵Wilson (2016)

⁶(Allen, 2018).

⁷Ibid.

⁸(Englebort, 1991).

⁹(Africa Confidential, 2020).

¹⁰(Bongyu, 2008).

identify and form close bonds with good relationship partners'.¹¹In the case of Cameroon, Welle (2020) asserted that "The quickest way to ascend power under this regime is to utter the (not-very secret) password: 'We thank the head of state' or 'Thanks to the head of state,' which falls without fail from the lips of party politicians all the time'. While gratitude and thankfulness are synonyms in the dictionary, there is a gap with regards to this ideal because there is a contextual difference between gratitude and being thankful. This therefore suggests lack of manifestations of gratitude among government authorities in Cameroon.

Biya has remained in power until now and his sought for re-election in the last presidential election came as no surprise.¹²While there are some critics on his regime, there are still several Cameroonians who support him and his regime. Biya loyalists have been manifesting their gratitude to the president by giving their full support to Biya's re-election campaign.¹³Aside from this, Biya is also backed by several political parties and tribes in Cameroon wherein they ensure reinforcement to all initiatives and measures implemented by the Biya regime as a sign of their gratitude and support for the president. As such, Biya's thirty-eight years in power can therefore be an indication of empirical representation of people's trust in him resulting to continuously supporting and re-electing him as a sign of Cameroonian's love and support for his regime. The remainder of this research is devoted to describing the political function of political gratitude as we examine its importance and capabilities to enhance system survival.

2.1. (Political) Gratitude: What It Stands For

Gratitude has been perceived and considered somewhat in literature from an ethical and moral perspective. In the political world, gratitude is also useful as it fulfils certain political functions necessary for system survival. Although the term gratitude is commonly used in religious circles, the political has also appropriated it to mean or represent some form of political morality.

According to Robert Emmons when we are grateful, we acknowledge that we have received a gift (material or nonmaterial), we recognize the value of that gift, and we appreciate the intentions of the donor.¹⁴ Gratitude comprises two stages: recognition and acknowledgment.¹⁵ Gratitude is acknowledgment of goodness in one's life. In gratitude, we say yes to life, argues Robert Emmons. We affirm that all things taken together, life is good and has elements that make it worth living.¹⁶ Indeed, political systems may have challenges meeting up with general interest at a point in time; however, political gratitude is another way of saying that in spite of the challenges, there is still something good about political life. The second dimension of gratitude is recognition. Gratitude is recognising that the source of the goodness lies at least partially outside the self.¹⁷ When we are grateful we are saying that part of that goodness we are having is not our making. We are accepting that people outside us can also contribute to make us great.

Gratitude is a way of asking further/more as if to say 'acknowledge and it is given'. Instead of asking all the time to be given, sometimes ruling elites need acknowledgement to provide more. There is a social and moral function of gratitude but there is also a political function of it. That is what we examine! Gratitude in its normative sense is a feeling of thankfulness interpreted as a non-physical energy that is descriptive of well being.¹⁸ Gratitude is normatively understood as an appreciative word or deed in return for someone's kindness.¹⁹ It is an automatic response to any situation that benefits us and is often given without awareness of its many benefits.²⁰ From this perspective gratitude is seen as something that comes as a surprise to the donor. This is another way of saying that the donor was not expecting a word or deed of gratitude. If it is true in the social world that gratitude comes as a surprise, in the political life, gratitude is sometimes an arrangement and in which case the beneficiary may be aware.²¹

We use the term political gratitude to distinguish 'gratitude' we are referring to from other types of gratitude that are social and spiritual in character. Political gratitude is a word or deed of gratefulness manifested to the political system via political authorities in recognition of something 'good' the political system has done or failed to do. Political gratitude is distinguished from other forms of gratitude in that it communicates essentially with the political system via political authorities—other forms of gratitude communicate and interact under societal conditions void of a political character.

Manifestations of gratitude is a broad concept we use to describe those actions undertaken by individuals or groups in society to publicly acknowledge or appreciate governmental authorities for what they have done in their favour. Motions of support is a kind of manifestation of gratitude; support marches (*marches de soutien*) is another kind of manifestation of gratitude, written letters of thanksgiving, etc all fall in the category. However, they have different energy, time and scope. Some are demanding (requiring the mobilising of many—example public marches and letters), others are less. Manifestation is a way of reaching out to governmental authorities through public marches and letters to show thanks, recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation. How important is political gratitude is what we examine in the next section.

¹¹(Allen, 2018, p. 16).

¹²(Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴ Emmons, Robert (2007) Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier, Boston New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, p.3.

¹⁵Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Esther, and Jerry Hicks (2004). Ask and it is given: Learning to manifest your desires, New York, Hay House.

¹⁹ Lee Coit in Hay and Friends, Ibid:27

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For details on how ruling elites arrange for collective motions of support as expression of loyalty to the Biya regime in Cameroon, see Assana, (2020) 'Motions of Support and the mobilisation of the ruling class in Cameroon', American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Science (ARJHSS), Volume 3, Issue 11, pp.51-68.

3. Theorizing Political Gratitude

The political practice of manifestation of gratitude informs of the nature of our political system in at least two ways. First, that the political system is fulfilling a demand and support function no matter how informal it might be perceived. Second, that the provision of welfare/public goods is perceived as favour and not a right—and from this end, the system is not in any obligation to provide welfare or at least it is in the obligation to select which segment of society can benefit from its largess. If we consider the definition of gratitude provided by Lee Coit, according to which gratitude is an appreciative word or deed given in return for someone's kindness²², then we can understand that service providers in the political system who are the ruling elites are perceived to be acting on the basis of kindness or generosity and not on a basis of duty. Contents in messages of gratitude reflect beliefs that perceive governmental authorities as kind and generous.

Political gratitude may have strong restorative force for struggling political systems. When individuals and groups express gratitude for what they have from the government, that enables them to somehow get over feelings of being backward and sorry for themselves. In fact levels of happiness are raised when we appreciate what others have done for us. It exhibits a sense of victory—having won a battle. We should remember that political life is also about competition among groups in society over resources. Once a group succeeds to obtain a resource, it finds itself as winner and not loser, and gratitude is used to release a sense of loss.

Although political gratitude can release the system from stress, there is a risk of being too grateful or relying so much on it. When the system receives gratitude and it is feeling relieved from stress; that feeling can in turn cause governmental elites to forget about the challenges that lie ahead. However, gratitude remains one of the ways the political system can use to remove concentration on what is negative and in fact focus on what is right.

The notion of unconditional political gratitude as opposed to conditional political gratitude is perhaps important to mention at this point. What we observe on political gratitude in the Biya system is that it is conditional—that is directed at government for its largess. What about unconditional political gratitude—one that we give to everyone regardless of whether we think they deserve it or not. Indeed, it is hard to extend gratitude to those who have hurt us, the system, but not impossible though. If political life considers being grateful to those who have hurt it in one way or the other, that political behaviour can produce a reconciliation and healing effect.

Gratitude frees the system from blame and guilt although this may be temporal. At least for the giver of gratitude, it can bring some kind of freedom to a self-imposed prison of hatred and revenge against the system. In this way gratitude is acting as a regulator of tension. Lee Coit narrates that perceived past wrongs are our prison bars and unconditional gratitude can melt these bars away.²³ Political gratitude in this light can reshape our perception of the system to the effect that the system we judged as harmful and unfair was a misinterpretation, a wrong judgement based on personal perception that is limited in scope.

Those who express political gratitude are not only doing so for governmental largess but sometimes, inadvertently, they are grateful for the courage that allow them to take personal risk to expressly 'thank' a system that has come under serious attack and criticism from opposition. They are also grateful for their ability of braving the odds of being stymied a sell-out of the regime.

In a nutshell, gratitude raises awareness of the true nature of our political system. It enables the system to become aware of itself. However, the practice of gratitude has also provoked thoughts about the system that it is pretending that everything is alright whereas it is not.

4. The Political Function of Gratitude: How the Political System Survives Through It

To question how political systems survive partly through political gratitude is investigating basically the reason why individuals and groups practice it and why the system as a whole is receptive to it.

5. Why Do People Engage in Manifestations of Gratitude?

There is more one explanation for engagement in manifestations of gratitude. The quest for recognition, the aversion of punishment and/or disappointment from the system, and political efficacy are among the key factors of political gratitude in Cameroon. The system wants it that way and feeds on it. It is not uncommon to find people (in distress) calling the presidential couple for help in the TV and social media. In Cameroon, we saw women in difficult social and health conditions, young unemployed young people, and like appealing for presidential support. This informal form of political contacting indicates a sense of belief that the president is a rescuer and perhaps the only one. It may also be a way of saying that the system through its leaders finds pleasure in seeing people asking for help directly from them and in return acting generously.

5.1. Gratitude as Support Input Into the Political System

Traditional forms of support input have dominated literature on the systems approach to the study of political life. This is because they are easily recognizable and have been considered as the formal and conventional forms common among modern political systems including those of the West. Can gratitude be understood and studied scientifically? The problem with manifestation of gratitude to governmental authorities derives from the fact that it is uncommon in Western political systems and therefore less visible. Every political system no matter how complex or simple performs the function support input. They may however, vary according to type of support input and how well they can be considered as

²²See Hay and Friends, Ibid:27.

²³Lee Coit, p. 29.

formal/conventional and/or informal/unconventional. The political function of manifestation of gratitude can serve the purpose of legitimizing the government just like any other input function of the political system.

Manifestations of gratitude are expressed forms of collective or individual action of thanksgiving to governmental authorities and in particular, to the chief executive, President of the Republic. It can take the form of occupation of public spaces or march demonstrations with posters and placards carrying messages of gratitude addressed to a particular governmental target. However, it can also be written.

There are basically two support input dimensions to manifestations of gratitude: the first is symbolic and the second is literal. It is symbolic because it is perceived and used as a conventional representation of support to public authorities. Manifestations of gratitude are also representative of attention and respect paid to public authorities by individuals and societal groups acting in the political system. It is literal in the sense that it is participatory support—being considered as political activity almost in the same way as other kinds of political activities such as voting, campaigning, political discussion, etc.

6. Gratitude as Strategic Demand into the Political System

Among the several demand inputs into the political system proposed by David Easton such as allocation of goods and services, regulation of behaviour, participation, communication and information, we notice that these are more or less obvious requests that could be formulated towards governmental authorities. In our framework, we propose a kind of demand with a strategic dimension—that is a demand that does not really appear as one in the naked eye but it has long term goal expectation. Manifestation of gratitude is one of them in the sense that expression of gratitude is perceived as an indirect appeal for further favour and recognition. It could be summed up as follows: we are with you (the system), do not forget us; we will continue to be with you so long as you do not forget us in the sharing of system spoils. It is also important to note that written expressions of gratitude usually end with an appeal to incumbent to stand as candidate in presidential election. For example, it is common to find phrases like ‘Nous,...vous prions d’être candidat à l’élection présidentielle de...’

7. The Output Function of Manifestations of Gratitude

Do manifestations of gratitude make any difference on the political system in terms of influencing governmental decisions and or the actions they take? Response to this question must consider two things: the first is what demonstrators expect to obtain from manifesting and the second is about what governmental authorities think and do about such manifestations. We made mention of the strategic character of manifestations of gratitude which implies that there are long term expectations of some (material) benefit from it. In this case, governmental response is indeterminate given that there is no specific time frame within which further benefit will be expected. That is also where the government can become slow to act and in fact in worst case scenarios, disappointment can be the response from government. For example, some who expressed gratitude to the president for appointing their son/daughter in a top governmental position will probably expect the later to remain in that position as long as possible or even move further. In fact, that is often the spirit of motion of support letters (the fear of losing some benefits such as juicy position in government is often a stimulus of motion of support letters and the like). However, the President can instead disappoint them by removing or demoting the appointee in which case political gratitude would not have made a difference. The power of discretion is therefore found to be used against the aspiration of suppliers of political gratitude in this case.

However, beyond the strategic dimension, feelings of satisfaction have come when government decides to formally acknowledge receipt of motion and act towards maintaining appointee or promoting him/her in a reasonable period of time. Overall, governmental power of discretion can affect expectation people have when they express gratitude to government in both positive and negative ways. Power of discretion can be used to delay governmental response, hence favourable output.

If governmental elites are to process demands effectively they must also sometimes rely on the support they get from individuals and societal groups they serve. To sometimes make informed decisions governmental elites need not only rely on demand input but also on support input. What governmental reaction is expected when manifestations of gratitude are expressed? Manifestations of gratitude may have an informative character. They may inform government of the right decision it has taken. In fact, government views manifestations of gratitude as positive feedback loop and can use it to maintain a status quo and/or improve the quality of decision for society. Manifestations of gratitude are also an expression of societal satisfaction of governmental policy, even if this is sometimes on particularistic and partisan lines. Government uses it to strengthen its bond with society and society uses it to strengthen bond with government.

8. Manifestation of Gratitude as Political Opportunity for Ruling Elite

Ruling elite and in particular those of the ruling party have considered motions of support as more or less credible sources of voter support. Gratitude develops a feeling of political satisfaction and fulfilment among the ruling elite, even if this is at the same time engaging them into some further political undertaking. Ruling elites perceive political gratitude as a political gift from the governed/citizens or at least the segment of society from which it comes. And individuals and groups who offer political gratitude consider it as their own gift, their own way of giving and of being generous. Although it is not clear whether governmental authorities are likely to assist even more those who manifest gratitude, it is relatively certain that gratitude create in those elites a sense of political satisfaction and obligation.

9. Challenges of Manifestations of Gratitude

Fears are expressed over the fact that manifestation of gratitude is losing its real meaning in social life²⁴ and this is also the case in political life. Lee Coit writes that like thanksgiving, thankfulness can become so stylized that its real meaning is lost. Just like 'How are you?' is not a question but a greeting, so Thank you can become no more than a nice way of ending interpersonal interaction.²⁵ Criticisms that have stood in the way of those who express 'thank you' messages to the Head of State, for example, suggest that political gratitude or gratitude in the political world is not an expression from the 'heart'; rather it highlights its instrumental character.

Widespread practice of political gratitude engenders excessive dependency on government and eventually pressure on State. Manifestations of gratitude may eventually be used by all to exert pressure on government given that it is perceived more or less as efficient political tool.

The problem with gratitude to governmental authorities is that it is perceived to be pro-government and therefore bias against other political actors of the system, notably those of the opposition. Can gratitude not be directed to the opposition for contributing to bringing democracy too?

10. Methods

From a general perspective, the scientific approach is grounded on finding a solution to a particular problem. In carrying out this study, documentary/textual analysis of existing studies was conducted. A review of related literatures was carried out wherein findings were interpreted in a narrative report. Boolean search strategy was adopted in searching for relevant literatures that can be useful for this research. Keywords such as gratitude AND governmental authorities OR Biya regime were used to search within the Google scholar database.

In order to determine the quality and relevance of the articles found from the search process, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established and taken into consideration. Inclusion and exclusion criteria include: (1) articles published between 2008 and 2020; (2) articles about the science of gratitude and manifestation of gratitude in the Biya regime at Cameroon; and (3) articles from Wikipedia and blogs were excluded.

11. Conclusion

Expressions of appreciation to governmental authorities have a strong political and strategic value for both the supplier and patron-receiver and by extension, the political system as a whole. The supplier through it gains political recognition and expects to gain more concession from governmental largess. The patron-receiver sees and interprets appreciation as expression of legitimacy which they often equate to governmental work well done and use it to justify governmental efficiency and political expediency. From a political system perspective appreciation could be seen as form of support in put although it is the incumbent that is seen to be the primary beneficiary.

In political systems where 'good' things are happening and life seems to be going the way members of that system want it to, it is relatively easy to feel grateful. Even then, political gratitude is not obvious—being taken for granted. A much greater challenge would have been to get in touch with political gratitude in political systems with difficult moments and where life may not be going the way we want. In these types of political systems people are more likely to feel hurt, unhappy, and resentful. Political systems facing difficult times paradoxically are the ones that have been more receptive to political gratitude. In Cameroon under the Biya regime, expressions of political gratitude to governmental authorities provide a base of appreciation and support for the 'good' thing the system is doing. However, the conditional character of political gratitude—being expressed towards ruling elite, leaves much to question about as far as the legitimate basis of such practice is concerned. In any case, political gratitude has a political function of keeping the system alive: helps to alleviate tension and stress in the system without which the system might submerge and collapse. Political gratitude seems to be the last thing that would occur in a political system facing hard times.

This research attempted to discuss the manifestations of gratitude to governmental authorities in Cameroon under the Biya regime through the adoption of a scientific approach based on the systems theory of political life of David Easton. In conducting a secondary research, findings revealed that gratitude is manifested discretely among government authorities and other parties in Cameroon and that the practice of gratitude is limited in the Biya regime. Hence, this research justifies the argument that Biya is still in power partly because the people express their love for him and the system in written and public manifestations of gratitude. However, some questions can be raised: (1) can discretionary gratitude to governmental authorities contribute to forming good relationships across the Cameroonian government? and (2) can the Biya regime be capable of increasing manifestation of gratitude across the government? Due to very limited to almost non-existent literature about the manifestations of gratitude to governmental authorities in Cameroon under the Biya regime, this research lacked adequate empirical evidences to support the argument. It is therefore recommended that further studies be conducted focusing on the manifestations of gratitude among Cameroonian government authorities and its impact on the Biya regime.

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