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The Media and the Administration of Elections in Cameroon

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Abstract:

One of the critical ways to determine the degree of democracy in a country is to see how free its press is. However, it is not only about seeing how the press is free but also how well it is participating in the political process, including the administration of elections. This paper argues that in Cameroon, the political liberalism of the early 1990s was associated with the emergence and proliferation of press freedoms. This 'new' media has been involved in the administration of elections in two fundamental ways: political communication and political socialization. The mass media in Cameroon has contributed to providing Cameroonians with political facts, raising public awareness and, to some extent, keeping the government responsive to demands for electoral reforms. The print newspaper, TV, and radio combined have emerged as prominent political communication and political socialization forces in the political landscape. However, they have not really operated without partisan tendencies. They continue to grapple with some challenges, which are mostly connected with door-to-door, face-to-face, limited/disproportionate outreach and coverage, government control of media and social media.

Keywords: Election administration, media, participation, political communication, political socialization

1. Introduction

The administration of elections is not only the monopoly of the government, but the specific body in charge of election administration, such as Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) in Cameroon, is also a concern of the media. The administration of elections in Cameroon also depends on the media. However, the extent of media participation in election administration in Cameroon, as well as the challenges that come with it, is sparsely investigated in scholarly literature. The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by identifying and explaining the role of the media in the administration of elections in Cameroon. It suggests that despite the presence of other actors around election matters, the media is nonetheless an actor not to be neglected when it comes to the administration of elections in the Cameroon context.

The role of the media in Cameroon in influencing important election policy decisions, maintaining or changing the status quo of election matters as well as candidates, and providing outlets for all types of views is enormous. However, the polarisation of the media landscape in Cameroon could represent a challenge to coherence in its role in the administration of elections, particularly in the promotion of political inequality between candidates and parties in competition. With the liberalization laws of 1990 in Cameroon, there has been a proliferation of media around political issues, including elections. So great is the impact of the media in Cameroon today that it has become a common goal among political actors, including government, politicians, civil society organizations, political parties and any other relevant stakeholder in elections, such as the ELECAM, to gain access to the media as they perceive it to be a powerful tool to promote their interest. These stakeholders have indeed come to realize that much can be gained or lost through what is printed or broadcasted in both private and public communications channels.

2. Methodology and Implication

Theoretically, the study is guided by the mediatization of politics hypothesis, emphasizing electoral politics. Empirically, semi-structured interviews, reports, and direct observation were used to collect data from resource persons and stakeholders in election administration. Data were also extracted from documentary sources in the specific subject area of election administration and media and politics. The most important groups consulted were political parties and candidates in elections. It is in their best interest to ensure that the elections are hitch-free. Traditional and religious authorities were also consulted because it is believed they wield an influence in the community and are always aware of issues within their community. They have a strong hold on their communities and represent law and order as they strive to promote peaceful political co-existence. They often interact with the population through meetings to discuss the community's welfare and religious services. Community-based organizations such as NGOs, trade unions, and sports associations also have strong memberships, which were taken into consideration. Media men and women were not left out; they represented the actors par excellence in the process.

Findings reveal that the media in Cameroon is significantly engaged and participates in the administration of elections through political communication with the public before, during, and after election time. Although the degree of

participation is highest during an election year and specifically during campaigns, the government continues to exercise some control to regulate it out of anomic paths. This study is against the backdrop of the argument that election stakeholders such as parties care little about using the media for their campaign communications because they believe the news in Cameroon has a negligible significance for election performance.

3. Brief Background of Media and the Political Process in Cameroon

In a historical survey of traditional newspapers in Cameroon, Tatchou (2022) describes how the early periods of the press were characterized by two trends: mixed ownership of newspapers shared between the colonial administration and the missionary societies and the utilitarian purposes of the newspapers. However, both newspapers targeted specific audiences with specific information and were not really political in character because elections and election administration were not a matter of public interest and concern at the time. For example, while newspapers owned by missionaries complemented evangelical efforts, the newspapers owned by the colonial administration sought to inform civil servants on the administrative news, regulations, appointments and transfers (Cited in Tatchou, 2022).

In the same direction, the radio was introduced in 1941 in Douala by the French foreign administration to defend French interests during World War II (WWII). The essence was primarily to provide the French with information about WWII and to inform and mobilize Cameroonians against the liberation activities of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) within the framework of what was known to be guerilla warfare. This was probably the first time the media, through the radio, was officially used for political purposes. This trend was followed after independence when the first president of an independent Cameroon, Ahmadou Ahidjo, used the radio to achieve a political agenda, one of which was to communicate to Cameroonians the necessity of merging all parties into a single party and of changing Cameroon from a Federal Republic to a United Republic. The radio was then used to inform Cameroonians of the available choices in the 1972 referendum organized to meet the political and to mobilize them to vote for a 'YES' in favour of a united republic of Cameroon. The radio began to be used in the administration of elections under President Ahidjo Par, particularly during the 1972 referendum operations.

4. The Media Landscape in Cameroon

The media in Cameroon is dominated by three categories with varying degrees of participation in election administration. These include the TV, radio and print newspapers. According to a UNESCO Institute for Statistics report published in 2012, there are 27 TV channels operating in Cameroon. While six of them (including the state-owned CRTV and five private-owned Equinox, STV, Canal 2 International, Vision 4 and DBS) reach more than 75 percent of households. According to the same report, while 10 other TV channels have a penetration rate estimated at between 25 and 75 percent, 11 others are somewhat below 25 percent. All these TV channels have at least one program dedicated to political issues; however, it is not specific to elections. They also organize spontaneous programs to communicate about election issues during election time.

There are also 126 radio channels, according to the same report, with 15 state-owned, 75 private-owned and 36 community-owned. All of these factors reach about 25 percent of households. While it is estimated that only CRTV radio reaches out to 75 percent of households, all others combined have a penetration rate of about 25 percent. There are also non-state radios and TV channels with national coverage, such as BBC, RFI, Africa No. 1, CNN, TV5, France 24, etc. While these foreign or international TV and radio channels are there to provide information in connection to their interest, they also sometimes inform Cameroonians of major political happenings and engage in electoral communication during presidential, parliamentary and senatorial election times. Private radio stations are involved in direct and indirect election administration matters, including the state-owned CRTV national station, which apparently appears to be moderate in its political communication of election issues, and the private-owned Equinox, RTS, Balafon, Sweet FM, ABK, TBC, Afrique Nouvelle, Hot Coffee, Veritas, Ocean City and Eden, who for the most adopt a left-wing position in political communication. Finally, the report suggests that there are 618 newspapers, including 613 that publish less than four times a week and five that publish at least four times a week. They are also physically available, mostly in urban cities. However, Cameroon Tribune is the only print state-owned newspaper that publishes five times a week, with a circulation estimated at 20,000 copies per day. Well-known private-owned daily newspapers include Le jour, Mutations, La Nouvelle Expression, Le Messenger, and The Guardian Post.

5. The Legal and Political Sources of Media Participation in the Administration of Elections

The legal environment of the media in Cameroon makes up the laws and other official rules and regulations that guarantee and govern the freedom of the press in Cameroon. Cameroon is a signatory to many international, continental and regional human rights treaties and agreements which have been ratified and now act as national laws following their publication. The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press are some of the legal tools that oblige Cameroon to abide by the declarations of freedom of expression. At the national stage, Freedom of expression is rooted in the preamble of the 1996 Cameroon constitution. However, prior to that, in December 1990¹, a series of liberty laws recognized freedom of expression and association as fundamental political rights. It guarantees freedom of expression and of the press as a basic freedom.

¹ A substantive piece of legislation regulating the operation of the media in Cameroon is law Number 90/52 of 19 December 1990 on freedom of Mass Communication. For example, the 1990 law favoured investment in the sector, which resulted in a boom and ignited the creation of the National Communication Council (NCC).

Reasons why citizens, including journalists, are asserting their rights without fear using several media platforms (written press, radio, television, social media, billposting, etc).

One constitutional source of the freedom of the press is the state. The state in Cameroon guarantees the right to individuals and groups and press men and women to organize and participate in the administration of elections within the limits accepted by law. Media participation in the administration of elections is a political right, and it is a political right that has several constitutional and legal sources. In addition to the international legislation on press freedom and political participation, to which Cameroon is a signatory, the constitution of Cameroon recognizes press freedom as a political right. In the Preamble of Cameroon's 1996 Constitution, "*The freedom of communication, of expression, of the press, of Assembly, of association,*" among others, are recognized and guaranteed.² *The Cameroon electoral code does not restrict the media from engaging in election administration, although the media's role therein is unclear. The absence of a specific disposition to the media in election administration in the Cameroon Electoral Code does not, however, limit the capacity of the media to act within the election administration process.*

The outcome of these legal predispositions in Cameroon is the political freedom of the press, expressed in the right to print and publish, the right to criticize (apparently the most common and dominant), and the right to report. With regards to the administration of elections, this will mean the right to print and publish information about election matters, the right to criticize candidates and parties in electoral competition, the right to criticize electoral policies such as the electoral code, and the right to report any election-related matter to the public. The media's role in election administration in Cameroon has essentially been political communication and political socialization. However, partisan trends remain traceable in how political and electoral information is communicated.

6. The Media & Election Administration: Political Communication & Political Socialization

The media is one of the most popular and used mediums to communicate messages about elections to a mass audience, and this is considered fundamental in its role in the administration of elections. Administration of election does not necessarily imply, in the practical and technical sense of the word, the formulation of election management policies, which are roles reserved for the government and ELECAM. It is also about the role of the media in communicating election matters to a wider audience or public. Media and administration of elections are essentially understood in terms of political communication function. The media may not be directly involved in enacting the election management laws and policies, such as determining when elections will take place and who is eligible or not. However, it can influence it by communicating the election policies and even mobilizing the masses against or for a particular electoral decision.

The media in Cameroon plays a political communication function and political socialization function. The media in Cameroon has created awareness about election and election issues, thereby getting Cameroonians into some kind of psychological involvement in politics and elections. During election time, newspapers, radio and TV stations in Cameroon draw up special schedules to ensure they fit with the political program of the election.³ With respect to the presidential elections of 2018, it was seen as a real moment for each media organ to demonstrate its capability to give maximum coverage to the various political activities on the field. Special independent political programs are created and devoted to the political happenings in the field.

In Cameroon, the oldest media are printed words and pictures: monthly, weekly, and daily newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets, and billboards. However, the media landscape was dominated for decades by the government-owned broadcaster, the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), both in the audio and audiovisual sectors and the written press by Cameroon Tribune. There are 40-50 private newspapers, most of which are published sporadically. The national print media developed in the early 2000s with publications including Mutations, African Sky, etc. The main weeklies are the Patriot, the Messenger, the Analyst, the Triumph, African Voices, African News, l'effort Camerounais, La nouvelle Expression, the Herald. There were several monthly publications and a few bi-monthlies.

In 1998, there were 11 AM radio stations, 8 FM stations, 3 SW radio stations, and 1 TV station. Four years later, under Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), there were 10 Regional radio stations and 1 national station, 3 FM urban commercial channels and 1 television station with 32 diffusion centres. There were 2.72 million radio sets in Cameroon and 450 thousand TV sets. The rise in the number of non-state radio stations was initially made possible by the signing in 1990 of the Freedom of Social Communication Law in Cameroon and was further enabled by the Decree on Private Audiovisual Communication Enterprises in 2000. Presently, there are over 100 private radio stations in Cameroon. In addition to the CRTV that covers 60% of the national territory, other private-owned TV stations include STV1 and STV2, Canal 2 International, Ariane TV, Equinox, TV Max, Vision 4, LTM TV, Samba TV, etc.,

In 2000 there was only 1 internet provider and 20 thousand users. However, as of 2002, there were 11 cyber-papers and many magazines online. According to a French media study published in 2017, Cameroon has one of the highest rates of Smartphone use in Africa. It also measured the performance of social networks in Cameroon for the first time in 2016. The results showed that 68.2% of individuals aged 15 and over are registered on a social network, including 75.3% among those aged 15-24. Facebook is the most popular network, followed by Google+, Instagram and Twitter. However, the survey was limited to four main cities and may not reflect rural usage. Community radios and billposting are mostly used in rural areas, with physical contact being the most efficient. Due to the high illiteracy rate in these areas and the absence of a reading culture in Cameroon, the written press remains the least used.

² Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the Constitution of 2 June 1972, amended and supplemented by Law No. 2008/001 of 14 April 2008.

³ Nyuylime, Lukong Pius (2018). "Presidential election and the media: The test of time", *Cameroon tribune*,

7. Challenges to Media Participation in Election Administration

In addition to a few challenges mentioned in the previous section, this study was able to identify door-to-door, face-to-face, limited/disproportionate outreach and coverage, government control of media and social media as key threats to effective media participation in election administration. A study by Tatchou (2022) revealed that parties do not really rely on mainstream media to reach out to potential constituents. In fact, according to the study, interviews from key party members of the CPDM, MRC, UDC, and SDF, "11 million de citoyens," which were leading political forces during the 2018 presidential elections, the importance of mass media as a source of political information is limited. Moreover, the main reason that usually accounted for this is limited coverage of mainstream media. It is thought of being limited to cities, whereas "the majority of voters live in rural areas where the access to the mass media and the internet is very limited," argues the spokesperson of the SDF (Tatchou, 2022). Despite the limits of mainstream media, parties have still hired news management and media experts with the CPDM, which is known to always hire national and international experts in traditional media to help plan and organize campaigns. Although ELECAM uses the mainstream media, especially state-owned TV, radio and newspaper, to send out political information, it nonetheless continues to find in field campaigns and door-to-door a veritable strategy to mobilize Cameroonians to register and vote.

Social media has also been identified as a threat to mainstream traditional media. Both the government, ELECAM and political parties have turned to social media to inform about elections and boost turnout. Both ELECAM and other political stakeholders have turned to social media for political communication and, in particular, to mobilize Cameroonians to register and vote. Political parties have turned to social media to effectively woo more voters and even target the undecided ones. The opposition is using a new internet-based campaign to reach more Cameroonians, with campaign headquarters having a team of volunteers and internet experts to update social media networks. Politicians have engaged in online chats with supporters to answer potential voters' questions, and many youths are also using the platform to show support or argue their views and easily keep track of their politicians online.⁴ Even ELECAM, Cameroon's main election management body, relies significantly on social media to accomplish its political communication and socialization role. ELECAM, for instance, has set up special digital Facebook and Twitter platforms to inform, raise awareness and encourage young Cameroonian citizens to enroll in their numbers on electoral registers.⁵ Social media suffers from limited accessibility. According to a case study on Cameroon by "The Alliance for Affordable Internet" (August 2014), access to the Internet in Cameroon is still very expensive, and as such, an important part of the population cannot afford it. This study holds that the percentage of the population that does have access spends about 60% of their average monthly income on an entry-level fixed broadband package. The World Bank statistics for Cameroon 2017 indicate 20% internet access.

Broadband signals are not received across the entire country, and the lack of electricity supply in the rural areas leaves a significant rural population with no access to TV images and limited radio frequencies. As per World Bank development indicators for 2016, 45.06% of Cameroonians live in rural areas, and only 21% of this population has access to electricity. The written press is mostly sold in the urban city centres and is still expensive (reading culture is also very much a problem, and also a high illiteracy rate, particularly in the rural areas)

Ever since social media became a key tool in elections, it has been used as a platform to escalate election violence (Mekole, 2023). This is because social media has gained considerable ground in facilitating the political and, of course, the democratic process in Cameroon (Ngange, 2020). ELECAM has counted on media regulation during elections to counter the phenomenon of fake news and electoral violence. This suggests that ELECAM does not operate alone in the administration of elections but also counts on the participation of the media to regulate electoral behaviour out of anomic paths.

Government implication in regulating media has been seen as a threat to effective media participation in politics and especially the administration of elections. According to Tanjong et al. (2003), government control of the media has tended to erode the credibility of government-owned national media (CRTV) and Cameroon Tribune, causing most people to turn to international media: BBC, CNN, VOA, and RFI, for political information about Cameroon. Understandably, the government's media regulation is a function of its traditional role as society order-maintainer; it is intended to regulate media behaviour out of anomic paths, although political interest reason could be attached to it.

All the same, a demographic challenge continues to make the work of the media difficult. According to the World Population Review statistics for 2018, the population of Cameroon stands at 24.68 million, with 45.06% of the population living in rural areas and only 21.27% having access to electricity with a predominantly illiterate population and very little or no access to telecommunication facilities, they are thus automatically pushed over to the non-traditional forms of communication like community radios that broadcast in the local vernacular, physical contact through traditional associations and meetings or gatherings. In Cameroon, where almost half of the population lives in rural areas and as such, there is limited or no access to electricity supply, internet and telecommunication, disseminating digital election messages can be challenging.

⁴ Africanews (2018), "Cameroon politicians use social media to woo voters", available at africanews.com, access March, 19, 2024.

⁵ ELECAM, (2024). "Elections Cameroon gets ever closer to youths!" available at elec.cm, accessed on March 18, 2024. According to this report, Cameroonian youths represent more than half the Cameroonian population. Yet, their participation in the electoral process remains lukewarm, and this has prompted ELECAM to think of new ways to reach out to them, one of which is, of course, social media, a tool most young people now use to get information.

8. Media Considerations for Effective Participation

Cameroon is a bilingual country, as enshrined in its constitution, with English and French as the two official languages of equal value. In addition to the obligatory use of the two official languages in developing election messages, the target audience must be considered. Given that the youth will be the target and that the majority are illiterate and live predominantly in the rural areas, the messages will have to be designed using the level of language, whether English or French, that they can understand and relate to and thus avoid rather verbose and high-sounding jargon. Better still, communication in their mother tongue would be a better option as and when necessary. The fact that this younger generation and new voters also use social media for communication and entertainment makes it a chosen tool to reach this target audience through Facebook, which records 91.48% usage according to Global Stats on social media statistics in Cameroon (April 2018). Catchy and captivating, attractive and colourful postings will draw the attention of this category of voters.

The multiplicity of ethnic groups (over 250) spread across 10 Administrative regions in Cameroon make this endeavour an even more daunting task. Communication instruments would have to be decentralized and deconcentrated to adopt the means used to the specificities of every locality.

If we agree that media outlets include newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the internet as per the definition of Wiktionary and media mapping is who has access to what kind of information, by what means and where (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network), within the Cameroonian context, for better media outreach, other means of communication must be envisaged. Face-to-face direct contact in its various forms, billboard postings, and use of community messengers and town criers would seem the most efficient in rural areas where the illiteracy rate is very high. This can also be intensified by the use of mobile sensitization caravans, meetings with the electorate in traditional gatherings, and the use of local languages to communicate, thus enabling the local voter to identify with the communicator.

Cameroon has a significant illiterate population, which needs to be harnessed. Young and new voters: The majority have never voted and are not interested in the electoral process. They are more concerned with finding a daily source of subsistence. There is also a significant rural population which is mostly young and illiterate. They have limited or no access to basic information. The above analysis paints a practical literary picture of the challenges facing the Cameroonian electoral system and how the system can be improved from the perspective of media and elections.

The media can sometimes go out of hand to violate individual privacy and engage in misinformation, hate speech, fake news and other forms of black propaganda during communication during election time. The National Communication Council (NCC) is there to regulate unethical media behaviour. In this case, the NCC has regulated the media by combating hate speech and violent communications spread during elections (Ndiapi Fopa, 2024). Through NCC cafes, the NCC is able to organize constructive debates to promote national unity and cohesion as well as harmony among press organs in Cameroon during election periods.

The NCC plays a prominent role in regulating the communication sector by ensuring that media organs meet the compulsory requirements and exercise the profession while respecting ethics and deontology. Media men and women may have to understand that it is normal to regulate media behaviour and that freedom of the press does not mean press anarchy. The NCC is there for that! Those who have not been able to toe the line saw their organs suspended. The NCC, which is part of the government structure, is bent on ensuring that the media remains an imperative tool for the growth of democracy in Cameroon. The media plays a direct role in the democratization process as a vector of information and a means of educating the general public at election time. The credibility of an election is also assessed by the ease with which the electors are credibly and impartially informed on political parties, politicians, candidates and the electoral process to enable them to make an informed choice. The NCC intervenes when it feels any of the rights above have been abused. It, therefore, comes to reconstruct a shattered image of some candidate or party. In fact, the NCC is responsible for protecting the dignity of the human person, freedom, transparency, pluralism and equilibrium in the communication programs of individual candidates, parties and political organizations in the media. However, its powers are limited to discipline and nominal sanctions.

9. Conclusion

The media, it is said, represents society unconditionally. It cries when society cries and laughs when society laughs. Media penetration in the body politics of society through the administration of elections is understandably significant. When society is thirsty for political and, especially, election information, the prime mechanism it can rely on is the media. In Cameroon, the print media (newspapers), TV and radio are dominant forms of media known to have participated in the administration of elections in several different capacities but essentially to communicate political (election information) and, by so doing, socialize Cameroonians into both normative and contentious politics. This has not been without challenges from the requirements of field presence, door-to-door and face-to-face, government control of the media and unprecedented increase in habits that rely on social media for information, as well as the limited penetration of mainstream media in society, particularly rural areas. Without media participation in politics and the administration of elections, Cameroonians would certainly be less informed, ill-informed, not informed, and consequently wrongly socialize into politics and democracy. The emergence of a critical mass media plays a significant political role in preventing monopoly in the participation and administration of elections, and ultimately, the political actors disguise wrongdoing and corruption in elections and lure the population into passive political support.

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