

## Indigenous Minorities and Political Pluralism in Cameroon

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The concept of "Indigenous Minorities" as used in Cameroon refers to ethnic groups located primarily in the coastal and urban areas of the South-West, Littoral and Center provinces. The common denominator among these ethnic groups is that they are numerically outnumbered in their native lands by non-natives who have emigrated from other parts of the country. The numerical superiority of these non-native communities (whose members are commonly referred to as "strangers") is usually accompanied by their domination of the political, economic and social life in these areas.

Indigenous Minorities have been wary of political pluralism because of fears that majority rule will institutionalize their minority (and hence marginal) status within their respective communities, and exclude them from the decision-making centers within these communities in favor of the demographically superior and more influential "stranger" community. The fear of non-native majorities in certain regions of Cameroon has given birth to two very controversial theories on political participation and representation; the *Automatic Majority* theory and the *Electoral Village* theory, both of which will be discussed later. These minorities therefore insist that any new political system must include clear constitutional provisions that give them a representative, if not predominant, political voice within their local communities.

The case of the indigenous minorities is a regional variation of what Donald Horowitz (*A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), has described at national level as "ascriptive majority rule". This is the situation where the nature of a country's political landscape in general, and the outcome of its elections in particular, are predetermined by demography. In such a system, elections are "tantamount to a census, and.. lock[s] out the minority from any significant political power save when

it can pry loose by violence or disruption" ( 97-98). Horowitz argues that democracy is

a 'system of processing and terminating intergroup conflicts' without foreordained outcomes, a way of institutionalizing uncertainty... The indeterminacy of these conceptions of democracy implies that no group should indefinitely be denied the opportunity to participate in government. (244).

In this regard, therefore, he concludes that "rigidly ascriptive majorities and minorities can hardly be said to be conducive to democratic rule," because their existence makes a mockery of the concept of democratic uncertainty.

This is the same argument being put forward by Cameroon's indigenous minorities.

### **Indigenous Minority Representation; the Quandry**

Is Horowitz's theory applicable in Cameroon? Are Cameroonian indigenous minorities victims of "Ascriptive majority rule"? Whatever the case, this underlying issue is essentially one of political representation in a democratic system. Put differently, it is about the respect of majority rule and the protection of minority rights.

Many have argued that the one-man-one-vote rule is the only real gauge of democracy, and that any tinkering of this core democratic principle in Cameroon or elsewhere in Africa will lead to disaster. However, as Nyamnjoh has argued (in *Africa's Media: Democracy & the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books, 2005)

The African experience in liberal democracy where ethnicity and belonging have continued to play a major role and voluntary associations have failed to take root, reveals the need for a fresh theoretical space, addressing not only

individual rights and freedoms, but also the interests of communal and cultural solidarities. (37)

It is in this context that indigenous minorities in Cameroon insist that the one-man-one-vote theory would be valid in Cameroon only if people, including the “stranger” communities, generally made political choices on the basis of ideology, which is not the case.

The late Francois Sengat Kuo, a former political strategist and speech writer for both Presidents Ahidjo and Biya, best captured this argument in his famous "Automatic Majority" concept. A native of the minority Duala ethnic group, Sengat Kuo argued back in 1985 that Indigenous Minorities needed special political protection and privileges, particularly in the selection and election of candidates running for multi-candidate positions within the ruling single party, the CPDM. He argued that the electoral choices of individuals from the Cameroonian western grasslands such as the Bamileke (who constitute the single largest ethnic group resident in Douala) were determined solely by ethnic solidarity rather than by ideology or competence. This, he argued, meant that in practice, grasslanders running for elective office in areas such as Douala would always have an "automatic majority" on their side because of the ethnic factor.

He, therefore, insisted that the only way to protect the rights of the Indigenous Minorities against the "automatic majority", and thus give them a participatory voice within their own local communities, was by selecting indigenous candidates over non-indigenous ones by "consensus" rather than through majority vote. This principle was effectively applied during the 1985 multi-candidate elections within the then single CPDM party. As a result of "consensus" a candidate of Bamileke origin was forced to abandon the race for the top party position in the Douala region in favor of a "son of the soil" candidate who eventually won. ("Le Problème des Minorités au Cameroun", in *Le Cameroun Eclatée*, 512-13).

In 1991, it was the turn of Yaounde University law professor, Gabriel Nlep, who argued that the best way to solve the problem of under-representation of Indigenous Minorities in their indigenous regions was to constitutionally oblige all Cameroonians to vote and run for office only in their respective regions of origin, which he referred to as their “*Electoral Village*”. This, he emphasized, would eliminate the potentially explosive grievances stemming from predominant political role that "stranger" elites generally play in their non-indigenous areas of residence, at the expense of the native elites who rarely have any control over the majority and politically decisive "stranger" votes. (*Le Cameroun Eclatée*, 106-7).

The main question, therefore, is whether Cameroonians can successfully come up with an acceptable/workable formula for political coexistence that takes into account the clamor for minority rights protection by the coastal and urban indigenous minorities, along with the equally valid calls for the respect of majority rule by the dominant "stranger" population.

In other words, can Cameroonians craft an inclusive democratic political system that will address what Nyamnjoh describes as the failure of liberal democracy "to provide for an ethnic cultural citizenship that blends well with African notions of civic citizenship..." (250)?