

## When Private and Public Spaces Collide: Power, Sex and Politics in Cameroon

By Dibussi Tande

Three weeks after the issue erupted on the national scene like a volcano, Cameroonians are still talking about the [“outing” of alleged homosexuals](#) in what the international media has variously described as an [anti-gay frenzy](#), a [“Gay witch hunt”](#) or a [“purity”](#) campaign that bears all the hallmarks of 21<sup>st</sup> century McCarthyism. Expectedly, gay rights activists around the world are up in arms and have been venting their anger on Internet chat groups, forums and blogs. According to [one report](#), British gay activist Peter Tatchell has called for protests at the Cameroonian embassy in London and demanded that Western governments halt all aid to Cameroon as long as the country remains a haven for homophobia:

British and EU governments should warn Cameroon that if these witch hunts are not halted we will suspend our aid and trade agreements. We cannot continue to have normal relations with a regime that condones and colludes with the violation of human rights.

Protests have also come from some members of the African blogger community such as the popular [Black Looks](#):

The suffering of LGBT [i.e., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] people is occurring all over Africa. Everyone who is a defender of human rights needs to join with together with the LGBT community in a show of progressive African solidarity. The current situation in Nigeria and now this in Cameroon provide an opportunity to everyone to join together in a show of strength. If we do not, we jeopardize our ability to continue our work and our lives in the future and everyone is affected.

Of course, like in most things Cameroonian, there is more to the entire saga than meets the eye. True, the campaign by the tabloids definitely has a McCarthyist feel to it, and some individuals and groups are obviously using it to settle old political and personal scores. Nonetheless, this is less about homosexuality (even though most Cameroonians are unapologetically conservative on this issue) and more about Cameroon politics.

We will get to that later, but first let us try to place the “gay bashing” in Cameroon in its proper context.

### **Going Beyond the Hysteria**

In recent years, the issue of homosexuality has become a major topic of discussion in Cameroon not so much because of homophobia, but mainly because of a widespread belief that social mobility and ascension is generally no longer achieved not through hard work and merit, but through membership in numerous esoteric sects that use homosexuality as a rite of passage. This is a topic which until recently was discussed only in private. However, it literarily came out of the closet when the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Yaoundé, Victor Tonyé Bakot, lashed out against the politization of homosexuality during his now famous [Christmas 2005 homily](#):

In the name of an employment offer, of a possible promotion; in the name of admission into a Professional School, they want to impose homosexuality on young people as a path to success...

This was followed by a similar cry by the Imam of Douala. In one fell swoop, allegations that homosexuality was being used as a tool for socio-political and economic advancement in Cameroon, gained credibility and became legitimate topics of public discussion.

Whether one is pro or anti-gay rights, the situation described by the Archbishop Bakot, which is backed by anecdotal evidence, should be a cause for concern. In fact, if this type of alleged institutional sexual coercion happened in the “liberal West”, there would be a flurry of sexual harassment lawsuits, accusations of the abuse of power, and even regime collapse. So, with all due respect to the well-intentioned gay-rights activists, the *broader* Cameroonian homosexuality discourse is not about the violation of privacy, but about the imposition and institutionalization of private sexual predilections on the public sphere.

As an article in [Le Messenger](#) rightly insists, it is a matter of public concern and debate when individuals engage in same-sex relationships not out of choice, but because they are forced to do so in order to obtain a government contract, an employment, a scholarship, a degree, or a promotion. It becomes a

State affair because homosexuality ceases to be a private act between two-consenting individuals and instead becomes a method of managing the public space.

From this perspective, the ongoing discourse on homosexuality -- no matter how poorly defined, or how crassly exploited by certain segments of the country's elite -- is about a fight for the soul of Cameroon, not so much in the moral sense, but in a socio-political sense: Will Cameroon become a true democracy and meritocracy where all citizens will have an equal shot at jobs, promotions, and admission into the prestigious Professional Schools which guarantee lifetime employment in the public service and direct access to state resources? Will the esoteric sects that control the state apparatus continue to determine the destiny of Cameroonians to the exclusion of all others? Or, will Cameroon become a Sextocracy, where political and other decisions are determined primarily by sexual orientation? That is the subtext of the ongoing brouhaha.

That said, there is no doubt that legitimate public interest in the alleged widespread use of sex as a method of governance is currently being exploited for political purposes, and that the many, if not the majority, of individuals on the said lists have no connection whatsoever with homosexuality. In this regard, many analysts argue that the timing and inquisitional nature of these lists have little to do with morality and everything to do with politics.

### **The War of “Clans”**

Back in 1997, Claude Wauthier published an article in the French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* titled [Africa's Freemasons: A strange inheritance](#) in which he analyzed the foray of freemasons into African politics. He pointed out that in many countries, including Cameroon, the rise of the freemasons as a political force had led to power struggles among its members and with similar sects:

These excursions into politics naturally cause serious divisions, not only between rival chapters but also between the masons and other organizations more or less closely associated with them, at least in the minds of the public. This was the case in Cameroon, where the masons and the Rosicrucians apparently became embroiled in a struggle for power.

[For more on this topic read [The Development of Freemasonry in Africa](#) ]

Today, many observers believe that the “anti-gay frenzy” in Cameroon is merely another chapter in age-old struggles for political supremacy between and within the different “networks” of the Biya regime which are apparently positioning themselves either for the next cabinet shake-up, or even for the post Biya era.

*La Nouvelle Expression* backs this theory by pointing out that many of the individuals on the infamous lists are well-known freemasons, and that most of them had featured earlier on another less famous list of alleged corrupt Government officials. It theorizes that the Cameroonian ruling class may be copying the French example where high-level scandals implicating freemasons resulted in a purge within their ranks, and the emergence of a new leadership which was able to access hitherto inaccessible spheres of influence and power.

Yes, there is a witch-hunt alright, but it is a political one.

Ekane Anicet, president of MANIDEM sums it best in an interview in *Le Messager*:

these lists are a manifestation of the unraveling of a system which is destroying itself from within... whether we like it or not, this affair – or non affair – has a strong political coloration ... Future generations will be told that in the last moments of the Biyaism, the Republic was seized by a violent spasm caused by the question of homosexuality.

#### **End Note: The Private Press on Trial**

Rather than creating a platform for a rational, legitimate, informed and long overdue debate about homosexuality in Cameroon, and the real or imagined influence of esoteric sects on national life, the tabloids have instead created a feeding frenzy where the key issues have been obscured by collective hysteria. This once again raises serious ethical issues about the Cameroonian private press which has always promised more than it has delivered in terms of professionalism, independence and objectivity. "Our pens", as Cameroonian columnist [Shanda Tomne has written](#), "must be at the service of the truth, of courage and honor, and not of defamation, blackmail and cowardice"

But that is another topic for another day...