

Dual Citizenship: Time for a Long Overdue National Debate (I)

By Dibussi Tande

Can Cameroon – a country which proudly celebrates its newfound HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Country) status - afford a development policy which shuts out some of its most resourceful and skilled citizens on the spurious claim that their patriotism is questionable because they reside abroad and have taken up foreign nationalities, usually for practical reasons?

After Cameroon won the first Afro-Asian football finals against Saudi Arabia in Jeddah in 1985, the Saudis refused to hand over the trophy on grounds that Cameroon had fielded an ineligible French player during the first leg encounter in Yaounde. The player in question was none other than the legendary Roger Milla who had showed up for the game with his French passport. The Cameroonian government insisted that even though Roger Milla carried a French passport he was still a *bona fide* Cameroonian citizen who had the right, in fact the obligation, to defend the colors of his native land. The issue was resolved months later following high-level diplomatic exchanges and the mediation of the world football governing body, FIFA.

About a decade later, the same Cameroonian Government barred another Cameroonian icon, the irascible novelist and critic Mongo Beti, from running for the 1997 parliamentary elections on grounds that he was not a Cameroonian. The reason? When Mongo Beti returned from exile a few years earlier, he had entered the country using a French passport. Until his death a few years later, the Biya regime continued to describe Mongo Beti as a foreigner who was ceaselessly meddling in the affairs of his host country Cameroon ...

These two incidents involving passports from the same foreign country clearly capture the schizophrenic and arbitrary application of Cameroon's outdated and highly restrictive nationality law (*Loi no. 68-LF du Juin 1968 portant Code de la nationalité*) which is out of step not only with the reality of Cameroonian society today, but also with current world-wide trends.

According to article 31 of the 1968 nationality code, any Cameroonian who acquires the nationality or citizenship of a foreign country, shall, upon that acquisition, cease to be a citizen of Cameroon. However, as we have seen in the case of Roger Milla and Mongo Beti, the nationality law is generally enforced only when it is in the interest of the regime in power to do so; the only reason Mongo Beti was consistently branded a foreigner and barred from contesting parliamentary elections was because he was a virulent critic of President Biya and his regime. Mongo Beti's treatment was quite different from that of Professor Hogbe Nlend, another prominent Cameroonian who had sought exile in France during the Ahidjo era. Hogbe Nlend, who later became the President of the influential Bordeaux chapter of the ruling CPDM party in the late eighties and early nineties, was eventually appointed a minister in Biya's cabinet in 1999 on the UPC ticket even though he carried a French passport just like Mungo Beti...

A growing concern...

Until recently, dual citizenship was a marginal issue which primarily concerned Cameroonian athletes (particularly professional footballers) in Europe. In fact, it is an open secret that practically every European-based player on the Cameroon national team holds a foreign passport. Like other professionals in the Diaspora, Cameroonians footballers take up foreign citizenship for practical reasons (e.g., to avoid

UEFA and national league quotas on foreign players, which existed before the [Bosman ruling](#) of 1996). In other cases, dual citizenship stems from the fact that some of these athletes were born in countries that grant citizenship by birth, but they later decided to play for Cameroon rather than for their country of birth. This is the case for example, of Joseph Desiré Job and Valerie Mezague both of whom were born in France, and who actually played for the French national team at junior levels before finally opting for Cameroon's Indomitable Lions.

Today, thanks to the establishment of vibrant and ever-growing Cameroonian Diaspora communities around the world (particularly in Europe and America) and the equally growing number of children of Cameroonian parentage born in these foreign countries, the issue of dual citizenship has become a critical one – even though it is yet to become part of the national discourse back in Cameroon. In fact, in the rare occasions when the issue of citizenship has made the headlines in Cameroon, it has been in the context of the fraudulent acquisition of Cameroonian citizenship by foreigners; a situation which according to the Government daily *Cameroon Tribune* (07/08/2002), may result in “a person of doubtful nationality could some day become the Prime Minister of Cameroon as was said to be the case elsewhere”...

Contradictory signals

During a visit to the United States in 2001, former Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge conceded in a press conference in Chicago that the issue of dual citizenship was an important one, and intimated that Cameroon may eventually have to follow the trend towards dual citizenship if it intended to fully exploit resources and skills of its ever-growing Diaspora community. Dr. Elvis Ngole Ngole, a prominent member of the Musonge delegation, even advised the Cameroonian Diaspora in the United States to mobilize its resources and energetically lobby lawmakers back home in view of amending the 1968 Citizenship law.

However, when Musonge's successor, Ephraim Inoni, visited the United States four years later, he simply brushed aside the issue of dual citizenship, insisting that Cameroonian law was very clear on the matter, and that change was not in the horizon.

The fact that most Cameroonians in the Diaspora are considered opponents of the Biya regime, and that the dissonant calls for dual citizenship legislation have been coupled with demands for Diaspora voting rights has not helped matters. It has inadvertently created and emotionally-charged and partisan environment where a reasoned and informed debate on the issue has become virtually impossible since many in the Biya regime consider the granting of dual citizenship rights to the Cameroon Diaspora as an unnecessary and reckless reward for the very people who are trying to bring down the regime in power.

Can Cameroon afford to reject dual citizenship?

Can Cameroon – a country which proudly celebrates its newfound HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Country) status - afford a development policy which shuts out some of its most resourceful and skilled citizens on the spurious claim that their patriotism is questionable because they reside abroad and have taken up foreign nationalities, usually for practical reasons?

Does a country which is hemorrhaging from loss of its best brains to other countries not owe it to itself and its unborn progeny to use every strategy and tool at its disposal to turn the *brain drain* into a *brain gain*?

Can Cameroon ever attain its development and modernization objectives without a more imaginative, less restrictive and less confrontational relationship with its thriving Diaspora community?

Finally are the reasons that once led to the rejection of dual citizenship still valid in the global village of the 21st century? Isn't it time for a long overdue honest, informed and objective national discussion "over whether dual citizenship is a healthy acknowledgment of a complex cultural identity or a watering-down of patriotic loyalty." ([Chicago Tribune](#), July 7, 2002).

The case against dual citizenship

The reasons why countries reject dual citizenship are legion (e.g., to avoid complications that may arise from custody disputes or extradition cases involving dual citizens). However, the most common reason advanced is that of "watered down loyalty" which supposedly arises when an individual takes up a second nationality or citizenship.

According to a [report by the Australian Parliament](#) on the pros and cons of dual citizenship, opponents of dual citizenship argue that "a person should be totally committed in a legal and emotional sense to one country" because "having more than one citizenship conflicts with notions of national identity and cohesion." The report cites Dr Katherine Betts of Monash University who insists that "the nation state is still an important political unit. Communities that work have boundaries. Blurred membership leads to blurred loyalty." Other opponents of dual citizenship, cited in a *Chicago Tribune* article argue that it commodifies national identity by "...treating passports like credit cards to be collected and used interchangeably depending on convenience."

In the specific case of African states, the rejection of dual citizenship is a product of the years immediately following independence when issues of national identity and national belonging were viewed primarily in exclusionary and even confrontational terms. In this context granting citizenship to individuals who still maintained their original nationalities was seen as a weakening the "unifying power" of the nation-state, threatening "National Unity" and slowing down the construction of the "nation".

Current trends

Close to half a century later, the national and international landscape has changed dramatically as a result of globalization and the dramatic growth of international migration. As the previously-cited Australian report points out:

"There is vastly greater mobility of people and increased incidence of people living and working in foreign countries for extended periods... There is greater acceptance in the modern, internationalised world, that individuals may be citizens of more than one country and satisfactorily meet duties as citizens in relation to each. There is greater acceptance that having dual citizens hasn't done much harm to nations, and that the benefits of dual citizenship extend beyond the individuals concerned."

Today, the issue of dual citizenship in Cameroon is less about excluding foreigners who are reluctant to give up their old nationalities, and more about including *bona fide* Cameroonians who now live abroad and are part of the highly-skilled, much sought-after and extremely mobile international workforce. Other countries are furiously competing for these skilled workers by offering them attractive incentives

ranging from high wages to permanent residence and even citizenship. Cameroon must be willing to offer equally enticing benefits - the most obvious being dual citizenship – if it also intends to compete on an equal footing with these countries and benefit from the skills of these professionals.

To date, there is no evidence to indicate that Cameroonians who have taken up foreign citizenship have become less attached to or less interested in their homeland, or that they are a threat to national security as a result. On the contrary, the Cameroonian Diaspora is contributing significantly in shoring up the Cameroonian economy. The remittance of Cameroonians abroad amounts to millions of dollars annually; Diaspora-owned business ventures employ thousands of Cameroonians at home; Cameroonian alumni, cultural, professional, and other Diaspora-based organizations carry out thousands of charitable ventures (from scholarships to communal development projects) in Cameroon each year. In the same vein, many prominent Cameroonians in the Diaspora have given the country a visibility on the international scene which it would otherwise not have had.

It is therefore safe to conclude that the contribution of Cameroon's Diaspora to national development has been very significant, and that the color of a dual citizen's passport has little or nothing to do with that citizen's level of commitment and attachment to home and country.

So what are the specific benefits of dual citizenship to individuals concerned and to their countries of origin? Which are some of those countries in Africa and elsewhere that have adopted dual citizenship and what justification was put forth for ultimately embracing dual citizenship legislation?

These questions will be answered in Part II of this posting.

To be continued...

Dual Citizenship (II): A Win-Win Situation for Self and for Country

By Dibussi Tande

Worldwide, arguments against dual citizenship have become less compelling, over time, while arguments in favour of dual citizenship have become stronger, and especially over the last 10 to 15 years...

As we saw in the first part of this article, globalization had dramatically altered the dual citizenship debate in many countries. The political reasons that were once used to reject dual citizenship in the 20th century are today steadily giving way to powerful economic and cultural arguments in favor of dual citizenship. As a report by Bella consultants (cited by [Edmund Bargblor](#)) states:

"Dual citizenship is becoming more common in today's increasingly interconnected economy. Countries such as India, the Philippines and Mexico are now seeking the advantages of dual citizenship by liberalizing their citizenship laws. These countries have realized that dual citizenship has the advantages of broadening a country's economic base, fostering trade and investment between the dual citizen's two respective countries."

This view is shared by Africa's Brain Drain, an NGO dedicated to turning the brain drain into a brain gain, which argues [on its website](#) that:

"Immigration regulations are cited as one of the barriers to exchange of skills and knowledge across borders. Foreign based professionals need to be assured that they would be able to return to their adopted country once they leave. Immigration laws in some industrialized nations require migrants to remain in the country for a specified period or risk losing their residence status. On the other hand, those who have been naturalized in their new country often have to make a choice between that or their home state, as some African countries do not recognize dual citizenship. Hence the need of more African authorities to allow dual citizenship."

As a leading Ugandan dual citizenship proponent pointed out during [Uganda's debate on dual citizenship](#) a couple of years ago: "If dual citizenship is easily available in all of Africa, then it would allow expatriates to return and invest in their birthplace, entice foreign investors and promote cross-border cooperation."

Increasing calls for dual citizenship across the African continent are also driven by a growing recognition that the African Diaspora is making immense contributions to the national economies of African countries, and that this contribution will only increase with the liberalization of citizenship laws. This was the stance taken by Ghana when it finally adopted the Dual Citizenship Regulation Act on July 3, 2002. Speaking during [the occasion](#), Dr. Addo-Kufuor, acting Minister of the Interior at the time, stated that:

"The legislation is a tribute to the great support Ghana has received from her citizens who have been living beyond her shores over the years. This support has been in the areas of economic, technical, social and infrastructural development ... The NRGS contribution of 400 million dollars cannot be treated lightly, and so the importance Ghana attaches to NRGS cannot be overemphasized".

Similarly, when India, a one-time leading opponent of dual citizenship, finally passed a law recognizing dual citizenship in 2003, the motivating factor for this dramatic change of heart was the need to tap into the skills of India's mammoth Diaspora. [According to the Government of India:](#)

“Persons of Indian origin settled in economically more advanced countries of the world have skills and expertise in vital sectors. The facility of Dual Citizenship would foster better co-operation in these sectors by way of investments and transfer of skills and resources.

The need of the PIOs to build emotional and cultural bonds with their will now be strengthened and will facilitate the Diaspora's contribution in India's social Development.

Dual Citizenship would also help to bring about and establish links of the younger generation of the Diaspora with India as they may be keen to keep in touch with their roots.”

Says [Bhanoji Rao:](#)

“One can take a sanguine view and extrapolate that India's stand to allow dual citizenship is one more step in its role as an emerging and confident global power which, in the years to come, would help usher in what might eventually lead to the establishment a global citizenry with freedom of movement to pursue opportunities wherever they arise.”

A Bridge to the Foreign Born Generation

While the dual citizenship debate has generally focused on first generation immigrants who still have direct ties to their countries of birth, there is increasing interest in the children and grandchildren of these immigrants who are born in these foreign countries, and who have only a tenuous link to their parents' countries of birth. In this case, dual citizenship offers an incentive to reconnect with their roots. Most significantly, it opens up the possibility of them living, working or setting up businesses in their parents' countries of origin.

In an article on strategies that African countries can use to tap into the potential of its Diaspora communities (“Good Ideas for Using the Diaspora”), [e-Africa online journal](#) (Sept. 2003, p 16) makes a strong case for extending citizenship to the foreign born children and spouses of Africans in the Diaspora:

“Many countries are examining how to make it easier for those living abroad with foreign-born children or spouses to return home. Dual citizenship would facilitate the freedom of movement of Africans between developed countries and the continent allowing skills to move as opportunities arise. It will also help prevent well-educated children born abroad from losing touch with Africa.”

This is a policy which countries such as Ireland are already benefiting from. Ireland now has one of the fastest growing economies in the world thanks in part to its "citizenship by descent" laws which allow the third and subsequent generation children born abroad to an Irish citizen to become Irish citizens by simply proving that one of their grandparents was Irish, even if none of their parents was born in Ireland.

A tool for building political clout

One of the rarely-mentioned benefits of dual citizenship, particularly for countries with well-organized Diaspora communities, is the ability of dual citizens to influence economic and political decisions in their host country in favor of their country of descent. For example, the potential influence of Mexican citizens on the American political system was one of the main reasons why Mexico ultimately abandoned its age-old hostility towards dual citizenship in 1998, and started to actively lobby Mexican nationals in the US who were eligible for US citizenship to take up that citizenship. In 2002, the Mexican government even organized a series of "nationality fairs" across the US to educate Mexicans on the benefits of dual nationality, encourage them to organize themselves into a potent political force within the US political system, and to use their political strength to influence key issues of interest to Mexicans such as immigration. *Chicago Tribune* was on target when it observed that "Foreign countries are increasingly encouraging expatriates... to claim dual citizenship, hoping to capitalize on the political clout and financial resources of those who have built new lives abroad."

The different flavors of dual citizenship

The list of countries that accept dual citizenship around the world and in Africa keeps on growing by the day. It is worth noting, however, that the form of dual nationality varies from country to country.

Ghana

According to Ghana's [Citizenship Act of 2000](#) which went into effect in July 2002, "A citizen of Ghana may hold the citizenship of any other country in addition to his citizenship of Ghana." Citizens who lost their citizenship as a result of the previous law which proscribed dual citizenship can regain their Ghanaian citizenship by apply to the Ministry of Interior for reinstatement.

Dual citizens have the same rights as other Ghanaian citizens. However, they cannot occupy certain key positions in the Government, the Army and security apparatus. Some of positions in question include Justices of the Supreme Court, Ambassador, Chief Director of a Ministry, or a Colonel in the Army.

India

In December 2003, the Indian Parliament passed the [Citizenship \(amendment\) Bill](#) granting dual citizenship to people of Indian origin around the world. The primary objective of this act is to (a) "simplify the procedure to facilitate the re-acquisition of Indian citizenship by persons of full age who are children of Indian citizens, and former citizens of independent India" and (b) "provide for the grant of overseas citizenship of India to persons of Indian origin belonging to specified countries, and Indian citizens who choose to acquire the citizenship of any of these countries at a later date".

Like its Ghanaian counterpart, the Indian citizenship bill lists a number of positions in government that cannot be occupied by overseas citizens of India. For example they cannot become President or Vice President, a Supreme Court or High Court Judge, a member of the House of the People or of the Council of States, or a member of the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council.

South Africa

The South African [Citizenship Amendment Act of 2004](#) which came into effect on 15 September 2004, enshrines the constitutional right to citizenship. Consequently, South Africans can no longer lose their South African citizenship if they become citizens of another country. However, the law requires that

South Africans must use their South African passport to enter or leave South Africa, although they can freely use their foreign passports outside South Africa.

A Need for Concerted and Sustained Action

In practically all the cases where national governments eventually adopted dual citizenship legislation, the change of heart was the result of extensive and sustained lobbying by their respective Diaspora communities. Cameroon is no different. For the issue of dual citizenship to register on the national Richter scale, the Cameroonian Diaspora must craft a coherent and organized lobbying strategy which clearly breaks from the solitary and attempts made so far to get the Government interested in the issue.

For starters, the Diaspora community should create a powerful organization whose sole mission and focus will be on changing article 31 of the Nationality code which prohibits dual citizenship.

Such an organization should rally legal experts, historians, economists, political scientists, etc, to produce a series of position papers which make a comprehensive and compelling case for dual nationality. Once completed, these position papers should be given the widest publicity possible in Cameroon and abroad. The campaign should also include taking out full page ads in leading Cameroonian newspapers

Representatives of the organization should be prepared to go to Cameroon to make their case directly to the Cameroonian people, and to Cameroonian politicians, legislators, the Government, civil society activists, the media, and the business and academic communities.

Like every lobbying effort, there is no guarantee that such a campaign will pay off immediately. The case of India, which is now at the forefront of the dual citizenship movement, is instructive in this regard. The Indian Diaspora community began to actively lobby for dual citizenship as far back as the 1970s during the Government of Prime Minister Moraji Desai who was openly hostile to the concept (Desai is famously remembered for his anti dual-citizenship quip that “no man can serve two masters”). It would take close to 30 years of persistent, unflagging and well-funded and very professional lobbying efforts by the Indian Diaspora and its allies in India to convince Indian politicians and legislators that dual citizenship was indeed a win-win situation.

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