

## Introduction

---

Cameroon's Social Democratic Front (SDF) nears its 20<sup>th</sup> year as the country's only viable opposition party. It combats both the Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM) regime and its own centrifugal forces of attrition at home, and is largely unknown abroad. Yet it survives, with some potential to contest state power and generate democratization initiatives. This synoptic review of its history and prospects, 1990-2011, frames the SDF as part of Africa's opposition politics project and establishes its Cameroonian setting as it approaches an election for the presidency, 2011, which will be crucial to any future it may still harbor.<sup>1</sup>

On May 26, 1990, Ni John Fru Ndi, its inaugural chairman who still holds that office, launched the SDF in the North West Province capital, Bamenda. It was Cameroon's first significant opposition party since the 1960s, and is, since then, the only one to sustain credibility as an alternative national political force to and past 2000. In the party's third year, October 1992, Fru Ndi very likely won the country's presidential election against the ten year incumbent, Paul Biya, and his CPDM, but was denied the presidency through the regime's fraudulence before and during the vote, its subsequent use of a compliant judiciary's declaration, and its enforcement of a state of emergency in the SDF's core area to secure its "victory." By 2000, the CPDM was safe in power, whatever its legitimacy.

Given these conditions at home and his interest in the wider world, Fru Ndi, restless in opposition at a time of relative calm in Cameroon, October 2000, will have known of two government changes elsewhere he must have found rueful in one case, sobering in the other. On the rueful side, as October began in Belgrade, Slobodan Milosevic was toppled by a convergence of forces broadly resembling what Fru Ndi brought against Biya at the height of Cameroonian resistance to autocracy, 1990-1992. But Vojislav Kostunica's coalition, surpassing Fru Ndi's capacities in ways proving decisive, mobilized a critical mass of organized industrial workers from Serbia's mines from a strike posture into a

march on Belgrade October 5, paralyzed the capital city, took over the national media services, and neutralized or won over the security forces, all supported by Montenegro and by key foreigners who then saw to Milosevic's removal. What might have been, in Yaounde and Cameroon? But where in tropical Africa are there at least short term circumstances like Yugoslavia's, to force, then ease, the relatively calm transition of October 2000, and lead to orderly and convincingly anti-Milosevic parliamentary elections by year's end? Not, it turned out, in Cameroon during the early 1990s. *Its* insurrectionary pro-democracy moments passed, and Fru Ndi a decade later in 2000 still sought a strategy to rekindle Cameroon's opposition.

Closer to Cameroon as October 2000 ended, there was another promising site of similar political change, in Côte d'Ivoire. Laurent Gbagbo, Fru Ndi's (then) closest friend and ally in the broadly oppositional spectrum of West and Central African political parties since 1990, won a disputed and largely boycotted presidential election against General Robert Guei, who then fled the country. The capital city and its media were in Gbagbo's hands, and he brought over the security forces. Abidjan October 25 seemed to resemble Belgrade October 5: hopeful signs, Fru Ndi might have thought, with encouraging parallels in first Kostunica's and then Gbagbo's apparent breakthroughs after his own years of impasse in Cameroon. But within a week, on the distinctly sobering side, and in the crucial absence of an effective Ivorien coalition for democratic change, came news of mass killings in Abidjan and violence elsewhere between ethnic, religious, and other factional interests, followed by recurrent violence into 2001. Although March's local elections were calmer, the year played out fitfully, before 2002 brought truly menacing eruptions that by 2003 involved Ivoriens, neighboring marauders and French soldiers in a civil war that remains a recurrent threat five years later.

To amplify the comparison with events elsewhere, the SDF at its 1990-1992 peak, while taking hundreds of casualties, dozens or scores of them fatal, drove national governance except by its security forces from Bamenda and created civil society formations there with promising foreign connections. It significantly

weakened state capacity in larger cities like interior Bafoussam (West Province) and the coastal metropolis for industry and commerce, Douala (Littoral Province). But it did not bring the nation's capital Yaounde to its knees and Cameroon therefore did not experience, where it most counted, the democratic openings that Prague (just before) gave Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution or (years later) Tbilisi and Kiev provided Georgia's Rose and the Ukraine's Orange Revolutions.

Fru Ndi might well have wondered, in the circumstances around 2000, "What might have been?" Or was the question, more properly, "What price (electoral) victory?" where so many African democracy movements, able at times to commandeer the streets but not to turn the corner into effective governance, lack solid, consensual, nationwide foundations? Such is the intriguing but clearly compromised and precarious nature of the opposition political project in Africa, from 1990 forward, at large and in Cameroon. Cameroon's limits register in admissions the author has heard from upper echelon SDF leaders that the party's popularity exceeds its governing capacity, even though it has written a series of proposals across the policy spectrum and maintains a durable organization for party activity. They also register in criticisms like Mongo Beti's before his death late in 2001. The great Cameroonian novelist and critic, *the* regime scourge since independence in 1960-1961, supported the SDF for a time after returning from exile in the early 1990s. But his views on the party, made known posthumously, 2002, in the first major critique easily accessible abroad, much utilized below, judged the SDF to be timid, sectarian, and prone to opportunism.

Voices both sympathetic and skeptical emerge in this case study of that difficult oppositional and democratic project in Cameroon, based on the SDF and Fru Ndi. While surveying and assessing one country's, one party's, one leader's experiences, it seeks also, comparatively, to expand and contribute to the still spotty literature on sub-Saharan Africa's democratization forces in their most overt form, political parties, their efforts to dislodge incumbent regimes since 1990, and their short to medium range prospects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first decade.

A definitive book assessing the SDF and its place in Cameroon and Africa--something like Richard Joseph's on the Union des Populations du Cameroun's (UPC's) first decade to 1956, not published until 1977, or like Achille Mbembe's subsequent publications on its leader Ruben um Nyobe, or both—has not yet appeared. Perhaps it will, by the year this text takes for its conclusion, 2011, or not long thereafter. In the meantime, questions loom. Will the SDF flourish, languish, or fail? Will its initiatives, energy, and determination continue, or run out? We don't yet know. The SDF remains a project with no certain fate. This is an interim monograph, thematic and synoptic rather than fully comprehensive. A truly authoritative study will record a generation of courageous struggle by Cameroonians against autocracy, and its frustrations, as it turns what's offered here into a complete history, like Joseph and Mbembe (combined) provide for the UPC. This book must suffice for now, as a provisional reading of an SDF trajectory that will be more clearly determined in 2011, when the next presidential election looms, an event likely to disclose the SDF's destiny, either to govern Cameroon or to join Africa's political might-have-beens. Here, then, is a prologue for what could be a praise song, or an epitaph.