

**The Baobab Tree Lives On:
Paul Biya and the Logic of Political Survival**

Submitted by: Ngwa Anye Kenneth
African Studies Department
Johns Hopkins SAIS
April 2009

I. Introduction

The baobab tree is considered by some to be the oldest form of life on the African continent. The tree is a symbol of endurance on a continent that endures – it weathers the elements, against the odds. As a metaphor, the baobab has been conjured up to describe not just the patience and fortitude of the powerless, but also the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the powerful. Perhaps because of this, the baobab tree is a suitable symbol to describe the longevity of the current president of Cameroon, Paul Biya, whose staying power as one of Africa’s longest serving heads of state is a testament not only to his skill and resilience, but also his ability to successfully negotiate populist pressure from below and donor demands from above during the so-called “third wave of democratisation,” which swept through much of Africa during the 1990s. Today, a full two decades after the onslaught of this “third wave,” a cursory survey of the political landscape might suggest that genuine democratic transformation *has* taken place, and that against all odds, most of the countries within sub-Saharan Africa are slowly marching towards democratic consolidation. Such an assertion could be supported by the fact that 36 out of the 47 countries that comprise the sub-continent demonstrate high degrees of electoral democracy (Freedom House 2008). Heads of state such as President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and former President John Kufuor of Ghana have been praised as the new faces of a dynamic and progressive leadership taking up positions within Africa, ready to help guide the ‘sick’ continent along its path to recovery. However, I argue that this image of renewed leadership throughout the continent is likely too optimistic, and that reflecting on the continued presence of leaders like Paul Biya may offer a more complete, and sobering, portrait of the state of leadership and democratic consolidation within Africa today. Unfortunately, today’s realities are such that many of the ‘Big Men’ whom Bruce Baker denotes as “the class of 1990” (comprised of those autocrats who were in power at the turn of the last decade) were able to ‘game the system’ and maintain a grip on power while re-cloaking themselves in democratic regalia (Baker 1998: 115).

In 1990, before the winds of political change swept through sub-Saharan Africa, there were 39 heads of states that fit the ‘autocrat label’ (Table I). Eighteen years later, nine of these leaders still hold the highest office within their states. The ability of these African leaders to maintain and prolong their grip on power has generated, and continues to generate, major analytic challenges to students of African politics.

TABLE I
Autocratic Leaders of Sub-Saharan Africa 1990^a

Leaders 1990 (Leaders 2008 in bold)	Country	‘Democratically elected (yr)	Notes
Ibrahim Babangida	Nigeria	-	Deposed palace Coup 93
Hastings Banda	Malawi	-	Lost elections 94; died 95
Mohamed Said Barre	Somali	-	Fled Rebels 1991; died 95
Paul Biya	Cameroon	1992	Re-elected 97 and 04
Omar Bongo	Gabon	1993	Re-elected 98 and 05
Pierre Buyoya	Burundi	-	Lost election 93; led coup
Blaise Campaore	Burkina Faso	1991	Re-elected 98 and 05
Joaquim Chissano	Mozambique	1994	Re-elected 99
Lansana Conté	Guinea	1993	Re-elected 93 and 03; died in office ‘09
Manuel Pinto da Costa	Sao Tome & Principe	-	‘Retired’ month before election 91
Federick De Klerk	South Africa	-	Lost election 94
Idriss Déby^b	Chad	1996	Re-elected 01 and 06
Samuel Doe	Liberia	-	Assassinated by rebels 90
Eduardo dos Santos	Angola	1992	
Gnassingbé Eyadéma	Togo	1993	Re-elected 98 and 03
Hassan Gouled Aptidon	Djibouti	1993	Stepped-down 99
Hissène Habré ^b	Chad	-	Fled rebels (Deby) 90
Juvénal Habyarimana	Rwanda	-	Assassinated 94
Félix Houphouët-Boigny	Cote D’Ivoire	1990	Died in office 93
Kenneth Kaunda	Zambia	-	Lost election 91
Mathieu Kérékou	Benin	1996	Lost election 91; elected 96 and 01
André-Dieudonné Kolingba	Central African Rep.	-	Lost election 93
Justin Metsing Lekhanya	Lesotho	-	Removed by coup 1991
Mengistu Haile Mariam	Ethiopia	-	Fled repels 91
Mobutu Sese Seko	Zaire	-	Fled repels 97; died 97
Daniel Arap Moi	Kenya	1992	Re-elect 97
Joseph Saidu Momoh	Sierra Leone	-	Remove by coup 92
Mswati III	Swaziland	-	Unchanged Monarchy
Yoweri Kaguta Museveni	Uganda	1996	Re-elected 01 and 06
Ali Hassan Mwinyi	Tanzania	-	Retired before election 95
Teodoro Obiang Nguema	Equatorial Guinea	1996	Re-elected 02
Aristides Pereira	Cape Verde	-	Lost election 91
Didier Ratsiraka	Madagascar	1997	Lost election 93; won in 97; lost again in 01
Jerry Rawlings	Ghana	1992	Re-elected 96; stepped-down in 00
Denis Sassou-Nguesso	Congo	2002	Lost election 92; won civil war 97; re-elected 02
Ali Seibou	Niger	-	Retired before election 93
Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya	Mauritania	1992	Re-elected 97 and 02; ousted in coup 05
General Moussa Traoré	Mali	-	Removed by coup 91
João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira	Guinea Bissau	2005	Won election 05; assassinated ‘09

Notes: ^aExcluded from the list were those authoritarian leaders who had participated in multiparty elections by 1990, such as those of Senegal, Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Comoros Island and Zimbabwe

^bHabré was president of Chad until December 1990, when Deby’s rebel force him out

Indeed, accounting for the staying power of some leaders, but not others, is a topic of ongoing debate among contemporary scholars. Distilled down, much of the debate has centred on two competing explanations. One school of thought heralds the remarkable ability of autocrats like Biya to survive the initial onslaught of the democratic current and then later adapt to the changing political realities within their countries. The other school of thought attributes the staying power of these leaders not to their prowess, but rather to the weakness of the general democratic enterprise within the region. (This second school of thought might characterize the democratising period of the 1990s as less of a ‘wave’ and more of a stream.) While acknowledging the “agent-structural dilemma” faced by students of regime change, this paper will combine aspects of both these schools of thought, while taking a more voluntarist perspective with regard to regime change experienced in sub-Saharan Africa.

Using the case of Paul Biya of Cameroon, this work argues that though structural factors were crucial in determining the outcome of the transition process, the most important determinant of regime change is the bargaining power of the autocrat. The paper will trace how Paul Biya was able to outsmart the opposition during the transition period through a combination of pre-emptive actions and calculated silence. I will argue that like his contemporary peers from the “class of 1990,” Paul Biya was able to develop a two-fold strategy for maintaining power. The first stage of Biya’s strategy involved an initial hostility to the pressures to democratise that took hold within Cameroon in the early 1990s. This hostility was followed by Biya’s overnight ‘conversion’ into a democrat when he realised that he could not kill the democratic drive (which was being launched both domestically and internationally). Following his overnight conversion, the second stage of Biya’s strategy involved an assessment of his political resources and the creation of a survival plan in the light of these resources. But before beginning an analysis of Biya’s survival and consolidation in power, I find it worthwhile to review some of the theoretical frameworks that help explain the art of political adaptation used by a number of autocrats within Africa today.

II. Theoretical Frameworks

One of the main theoretical bases for understanding the longevity of African autocrats, even when faced with pressure to open up political space, can be found in the seminal book *Personal Rule* by Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg. In their work, Jackson and Rosberg paint a clear picture of post-colonial governance in Africa, which they describe as being “more a matter of seamanship and less one of navigation – that is, staying afloat rather than going somewhere” (Jackson and Rosberg 1992: 19). Hence, most autocrats will do whatever it takes to hold on to power and stifle any attempt to change the status quo. When autocrats realise that their attempts at holding back the democratic tides are failing, they quickly re-invent themselves. In most cases, however, their conversions from tyrants to democrats are cosmetic, hence the labels “apparent conversions,” “feigned conversions,” or “concession without conversion” (Joseph 1989).

In an insightful essay on the relationship between economics and politics in the creation of democracy, Robert Gates expounds upon his theory of the nature of “end-game bargaining” during political transitions between autocrats and insurgent democrats (Gates 1991: 24-27). He describes autocrats as no “friends of liberty” who “scorn the rule of law, shun due process, and run roughshod over rights in person and property.” But then when they are faced with citizen rebellion in the name of democracy, these same autocrats become converts to the democratic cause and “seek the protection of the law and the courts; they demand due process... Formally the most dangerous enemies of liberal government, they now become among its most fervent champions.” Once autocrats have been able to weather the initial political storm, their next strategy involves the maintenance of support among relevant groups. To this end, they resort to the very tactics that they employed during their periods of authoritarian rule. The main component of these tactics is what has been dubbed ‘the divide-and-rule strategy,’ which involves co-opting politically important groups either through the threat of repression or through bribery, and hence ensuring the full control over

the sources of political power within transitioning states (Acemoglu et al. 2004). The ability to foster political infighting within the opposition was also a key mechanism through which to undermine political opponents. As we will see, Paul Biya was able to successfully employ many of these tactics during the 1990s, making Cameroon's transition to multiparty electoral democracy an apt case study in the partial, or semi, reformation that characterized the political transitions of many African states during this period.

III. Cameroon and the Context of Reform

At some point in the early 1990s, President Paul Biya of Cameroon realized that he would not be able to withstand the strong political winds of change that were blowing across the continent without recalibrating his political strategies. Understandably, the situation within Cameroon provided a ripe scenario for political liberalization. By the end of the 1980s, the country was suffering under the yolk of a severe and painful economic crisis. Austerity measures implemented in line with the prescriptions of the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) had taken a toll on the livelihoods of most Cameroonians, even as political elites linked to the President's Beti ethnic group continued to live a lavish lifestyle (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 101). No doubt, the economic pressures building within Cameroon during this period (characterized by high unemployment and the rollback of state-provided services) created some of the necessary conditions for a groundswell of populist sentiment within the country that pushed for a democratic upheaval. What makes this period so interesting, however, is the fact that this groundswell coincided with a newfound interest in political liberalization among Africa's many donors. While Cameroon itself was not an aid recipient of the Soviet Union, the USSR's collapse in 1991 was no doubt one trigger that strengthened an already-growing push for democratic reforms across Africa, at least internationally. The demise of the Soviet bloc invigorated bilateral donors like France and Britain, both of whom had already begun to condition aid on governance reforms within their former colonies. And certainly, the continued aid dependence of African states

opened doors for multilateral organizations like the World Bank to likewise push for governance reform. (The Bank officially dates its governance and anti-corruption activities to a workshop held in Uganda in 1994 [WBI Governance and Anti-Corruption].) Coupled with these international pressures was the specter of democracy emerging within many of the former communist nations of Eastern Europe. No doubt, this too served as a catalyst for people within African states to demand political liberalization and democratic transition for themselves, as well.

Within Cameroon, mounting pressure from France to democratize became an especially potent force upon the regime of Paul Biya. As early as 1990, a speech given by President Francois Mitterand at the Franco-African summit at La Baule, France set the tone for a reversal in France's unflinching support for despotic regimes in its ex-colonies (McKesson 1993: 58). And France's stance in this regard only grew as the '90s wore on. By linking future economic assistance to political reforms and respect for human rights, Mitterand helped set the stage for popular democratic movements in support of democratic reform. (France's new stance was further reinforced in 1991 by the Chaillot Declaration, which was the final resolution of the fourth summit of francophone governments held at the Chaillot Palace in Paris [Africa Research Bulletin 1991: 10610].)

Politics grew even more difficult for local 'Big Men' in sub-Saharan Africa when the British decided to join the bandwagon of Western governments that openly supported democratic transition within the region. Britain's move, in this regard, was presented during a conference on the prospects for Africa held in the House of Commons in June 1990. In his speech to the House, Douglas Hurd, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, indicated that from that point on, financial assistance would be conditioned on whether the recipient nation had "tended towards pluralism, public accountability, respect of rule of law and human rights" (West Africa 1990: 1077). Within Cameroon, the decision by France and Britain to advocate for a democratic opening of political space was significant for two reasons. First, these moves were historic because both countries were ex-colonial powers

that had provided significant support to the Biya regime up until that point. Second, by linking aid to political reforms, France, as Cameroon's primary trading partner, was sending a strong message to Biya to succumb to its prerogatives or face dire financial consequences. The stance by France served to magnify the earlier decision by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to link aid to economic restructurings and political liberalization (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 103). With pressure emanating both within the home front and beyond its borders, Biya embarked on what would become the trajectory that ensured the survival of his regime.

IV. Paul Biya: Negotiating the Democratic Wave

It is difficult to judge whether the reaction of the Biya regime to the pressure for democratic change was a calculated one or whether the regime extemporized. In retrospect, what is observed is that although the Biya government was caught off guard and at a low ebb in its rule in the late-1980s and early-1990s, it was able to absorb the initial shock of these pressures to reform by discrediting the whole democratic enterprise in Africa. Returning to the rhetoric he had proclaimed when he came to power in 1982, Paul Biya launched a series of scathing attacks against multiparty democracy, beginning in 1987. Around this time, he claimed that the only viable democratic process was that which he had promised in his 'New Deal' program back in 1985. For Biya and his ruling clique, any democratic opening should operate within the confines of a single party state. This, he claimed, would safeguard Cameroon from the conflicts that had plagued other African countries (Biya 1987: 44-45). He continued to argue that the one-party system espoused by Cameroon remained "the best laboratory for a truly pluralistic democracy in Cameroon, the necessary prelude to multipartism" (Biya 1987: 44-45). In doing so, Biya joined the likes of Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, all of whom had harsh words to say about multiparty democracy. Biya described it as "a distasteful passing fetish" and "manoeuvres of division, intoxication and destabilization" (West Africa 1990: 2065).

In spite of Biya's stated distaste for multiparty politics, when the Biya regime recognized its failure to stem the democratic tides, it resorted to a new tactic, which involved a combination of hostile utterances and the usage of force against advocates for democratic change. The reliance on the military to prop up his regime was not a novelty within Biya's style of governance. During the whole transition period, the military provided Biya with a loyal support base (Gros, 1995: 121). The first demonstration of Biya's willingness to use force to quell reformist pressures occurred during the trial of the "Douala ten" in 1990.

The "Douala ten" were a group of lawyers led by Yondo Black, the former president of the Cameroon Bar Association (CBA), who had been meeting to explore the possibility of creating a nonpartisan movement to promote multiparty democracy (Amnesty International 1990: 3). However, in February 1990, agents of the security police (CENER) arrested Yondo Black and his cohorts before they could launch the National Coordination for Democracy and a Multi-party System (NCDM) (Mukong 1992: 128). Their arrest and trial represented the onset of Biya's brutal campaign against political dissent. This campaign involved the use of the military, judiciary, and political institutions linked to the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). The charges levied against the Douala ten included holding clandestine meetings, inciting revolt, insulting the Office of the President, and distributing material that was hostile to violation of certain laws (Takougang and Kriefer 1998: 105). The accused were remanded in custody for six weeks before they were tried and convicted by a military tribunal in what Amnesty International described as "an abuse of the judicial process in order to provide some legal basis for the government's determination to punish supporters of the multi-party system" (Amnesty International 1990: 9). While the judiciary machine was at work quashing dissent, Paul Biya activated his political apparatus using his CPDM party as conduit to discredit the opposition. Across the country, CPDM cells organised rallies to denounce the defendants and those who supported them as "trouble-makers," "adventurers," and "selfish demagogues" (Amnesty International 1990: 6). Yet, the eventual conviction of the Douala ten and the show of support from CPDM diehards did not quell the demand for

democratic change. Rather, in the upcoming years, the Biya government found itself constantly faced with new challenges, and with reduced space in which to manoeuvre.

On the heels of the Douala ten conviction, the Biya government nevertheless found itself confronting the reality of new political parties in Cameroon, thanks in part to the work of enterprising reformers, who discovered a loophole in the country's constitution that allowed for the formation of associations (Mbu 2006: 11). The first new political party formed under the protection of this loophole was the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in May of 1990. The SDF was closely followed by the formation of a succession of political parties, including the National Union for Democracy and Progress (formed by Maigari Bello Bouba, a one-time prime minister in Biya's government) and the Cameroon Democratic Front (formed by Jean-Michel Tekam, one of the defendants in the Yondo Black case) (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 107). The Biya regime reacted to the formation of these parties by sending troops and paramilitary police into the streets to disrupt any attempts at launching meetings. The consequences of such actions were the loss of human life, as was the case in Bamenda during the induction of the SDF, where security forces gunned down six youths at a political rally. Coupled with these military efforts, the government continued to mobilize members of the ruling party to go into the streets and denounce those "misguided citizens" whom they regarded as promoters of "tribalism, favouritism, sectionalism and demagoguery" (Cameroon Tribune 1990). Yet, while confrontation between the forces of law and order continued on the streets of major Cameroonian cities, a new form of dissent was building which had the potential of shaking the foundation of the Biya regime.

The public demands for the introduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon were to take a new turn when cracks began to appear within the mould of the ruling party. The rifts between progressive and conservative elements on the CPDM were a known fact ever since the party's founding in 1985. However, the fault line deepened over disagreements concerning how to deal with the current situation. The progressive wing of the party viewed the social upheaval of the early 1990s as a consequence not only of the economic problems

facing the country, but also the limited political openings that were promised by the president when he came to power. The party's conservatives, on the other hand, advocated the maintenance of the status quo (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 107). The appearance of division within the CPDM forced Biya to begin the process of concession that culminated with his eventual conversion into a kind of "tyrant democrat."

President Biya's cosmetic makeover began with his promise during the CPDM National Congress of 1990 to reform some of the laws that impeded democratization. Among the statutes targeted for repeal or revision were two laws from the 1960s: an anti-subversion law and a law that limited the freedom of association. In addition, Biya pledged to introduce laws that guaranteed the freedom of the press, while also vowing to form an independent human rights committee and release jailed political prisoners, including those convicted during the trial of the "Douala ten." To mend the rift that was growing within his party, Biya decided to expand the CPDM Central Committee from sixty to 120 members, in part to increase patronage networks and shore up support for the CPDM's more conservative elements (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 108). In keeping with that which had been observed up until this point, the response of Cameroonian democratic reformers to Biya's promises was to engage in even more assertive protests against the government, worried as they were that Biya's promises were mere window-dressing. The one non-negotiable concession that the nascent opposition demanded was the introduction of multiparty politics. Biya's attempt to pacify them with promises of other reforms did nothing to stem the tide of their discontent. Thus faced with external pressures, coupled with frequent and more virulent domestic protests, Paul Biya was forced into what I describe as the final stage of the first part of his twofold trajectory. This stage involved the introduction of laws that were meant to pave the way for genuine democratic transition. However, while Biya was introducing new laws and abrogating old ones, he left loopholes through which he could exploit and ensure full control of the entire transition process.

On December 5, 1990, the National Assembly approved the more than 100 “Liberty Laws” tabled by the president (Sopecam, 1991). These laws covered issues related to a broad segment of Cameroonian society, but the most telling aspects had to do with the ability to hold public meeting and processions, the maintenance of law and order, the freedom of the press, and the creation of political parties. Law No. 90/55 of 19/12/90, for example, governed the right to hold public meetings. Yet, while allowing for the organization of public meetings, the law nevertheless created a strict authorization process and contained a clause that permitted indiscriminate prosecution. Furthermore, Article 6 (1) of the same law placed further restrictions on the holding of public processions and demonstrations by complicating the application process. Law No. 90/54 of 19/12/90, which governed the maintenance of law and order, instituted a preventive detention period of up to fifteen days, a timeframe that was eight days *more* than the detention period allowed for under a state of emergency. Insofar as freedom of the press was concerned, the abrogation of Ordinance No. 62/OF/18 of March 1962 and the subsequent enactment of Law No. 90/46 opened the way for the establishment of a free press in Cameroon. But as was the case with the other new laws passed during this period, the Biya government inserted clauses that circumscribed the independence of the press. One such clauses can be found in Section 14 of Law No. 90/052, which “required newspapers to submit two signed copies to administrative authorities where the paper was published, two hours before dailies and four hours before weeklies were placed on sale,” so that government authorities would be able to remove or make illegible “materials considered subversive or politically inappropriate” (Takougang and Kriefer 1998: 108). But of all these new laws, perhaps the most crucial one related to political parties. Law No. 90/056 instituted multiparty politics in Cameroon. But as a way of limiting the scope of action of the new political parties, the law strictly banned the ability of these parties to receive international assistance or support of any kind, while also prohibiting the formation of those parties that were deemed ethnocentric or having a single linguistic, religious, or provincial base. In this

regard, linguistic and provincial restrictions were specifically designed to prevent the formation of political parties from the anglophone region of Cameroon.

By the end of 1990, Paul Biya had successfully carried out the first stage of his twofold strategy. He had weathered the initial onslaught of the democratising storm, had held the opposition in check, had maintained total control of the process and reacted forcefully when deemed necessary. While many other African heads of state had been forced to relinquish power to the opposition, Biya and a few others were able to keep the opposition at bay through a combination of limited concessions and massive coercion. The label 'tyrant democrat' is an apt description of Biya's rule at this stage. Commenting about the situation in Cameroon during a visit to Paris in April of 1991, for example, Paul Biya labelled Cameroon an "advanced democracy" and himself the "best pupil" of Francois Mitterrand in relation to democratization (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 109). It is impossible to know whether he truly believed his own words, or if he was simply satisfied with his ability to construct a cosmetic makeover within the state. However, the political sophistication that Biya exhibited during this period of transition suggests him to be a political leader of uncommon political intelligence and savvy, and a leader who likely recognized the gap between the ideals articulated by Mitterrand and the political realities with which he had to contend in order to maintain his hold on power. Indeed, with political space in Cameroon partially open and the rules of the game changed, the Biya regime had to prepare for the next stage, which would undoubtedly involve elections. While the first stage of the two-fold trajectory can be characterized by the Biya regime reacting to the initiatives of others, the next stage of this trajectory found the Biya regime on the offensive.

The general consensus of those leaders who had survived the original democratic onslaught was that in order to maintain power, they had to reassess their political resources and craft a reliable survival plan. But the main sticking point involved the issue of timeframes. As Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle observed, most of the democratic transition processes that took place in sub-Saharan Africa happened quickly, especially when

compared to the experiences of ex-Soviet republics after the fall of communism (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 4). Although relatively short, the duration of the transition varied among the countries of the surviving autocrats. The question raised by the variation in timeframes is whether the decision to delay the process of democratization on the part of autocrats was a well-calculated strategy or a consequence of uncertainty about how to successfully manage the changing situation (Baker 1998: 120). In the case of Cameroon, no more than 15 months lapsed between the institution of multiparty politics and the convening of the first elections. With hindsight, one can argue that the period in question provided the Biya regime with ample time in which to construct a base of support and starve the opposition of crucially needed resources. This support-building strategy by Biya was only possible because he could exploit his power of incumbency, which permitted him to employ a variety of tactics that were targeted at the opposition.

The most widely used tactic during this period was the containment of the opposition. The Biya regime came to the realisation after the experiences of the initial months of political upheavals that denying the opposition the oxygen of publicity was crucial for its political survival (Baker 1998: 121). The fact that the regime had previously acceded to the opposition's demand for democratic liberalization meant that the government's space in which to manoeuvre was greatly reduced. Faced with such a situation, the only approach possible for the regime was to continue with its cosmetic concessions while simultaneously limiting the space available to the opposition to craft any viable electoral strategy. As it turned out, one of the most important issues was whether or not the government should convene a 'sovereign national conference.' Sovereign national conferences were an instrument of regime change employed mostly in francophone sub-Saharan Africa during the period of democratic transition in the 1990s. Such a conference was first employed in Benin in 1990 and led to the removal from power of President Mathieu Kérékou. The sovereign national conference drew its conceptual base from the Estates-General of 1789, which served as a prelude to the French Revolution. The French origin of the concept explains the fact that

mostly francophone opposition parties opted for this mode of regime change (Robinson 1994). Apart from Benin, sovereign national conferences were successfully used in Congo Brazzaville, Mali, and Niger to bring about regime change in the early 1990s, while the leaders of Gabon, Chad, Togo and Zaire were able to stall the process in their respective countries.

As was the trend in many countries in francophone sub-Saharan Africa, opposition political parties grasped hold of the idea of using a national conference as the best method through which to control the transition process and level the political playing field. In this regard, Cameroon was no exception. To pressure the government to heed its demand, the major opposition groups decided to form the National Coordination of Opposition Parties and Associations (NCOPA). This organisation organised political rallies and strikes under the banner of civil disobedience, which came to be known as “villes morte / ghost cities” (Mbu 2006: 87). Yet, the experience of Mathieu Kérékou in Benin served as a warning to other autocrats about the danger of holding national conferences. Hence the Biya regime categorically refused to accede to this demand by the opposition. In place of a national conference, the government proposed and implemented a series of constitutional concessions, including the reinstatement of the position of prime minister, which went to Sadou Hayatou, a technocrat and northerner. The intended symbolism of this choice of prime minister was the fact that Hayatou was neither an ethnic Beti, like most of the president’s advisors, nor he a regime ideologue (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 125). Yet this political and constitutional carrot was accompanied by a security stick in the form of military “Operational Commands,” which wielded widespread powers covering all but the three provinces (Center, South and East) that were mostly populated by the Beti ethnic group. Indeed, the regime was ready for a fight, as can be clearly observed in the speech given by President Biya on June 27, 1991 to the National Assembly, when he declared: “Je l’ai dit et je le maintiens: la conférence Nationale est sans objet pour le Cameroun... Seules les urnes parleront / I have said it and I maintain it: The National Conference has no purpose for Cameroon.... Only the ballot boxes

will speak” (Cameroon Tribune 1991). The message encapsulated in this speech was clear: law and order will be maintained at all cost and the government was not going to back down.

One of the defining characteristics of this period was the fact that the government reacted to every action taken by the opposition with an excessive use of force and intimidation. When university students in Yaounde decided to join the call for the further opening of democratic space, troops were sent in to quell the protest. While both camps disputed the number of casualties that resulted from police brutality, and the negative impact on the educational system was clear, with students staying out of school for weeks only to be forced at gunpoint to sit for exams (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 124). Other documented cases of police brutality included the assassination attempt in Yaounde of the SDF leader John Fru Ndi on October 2 1990. During that episode, his car was attacked with grenades and bullets (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 108). Ultimately, the heavy-handed tactics of the government’s security forces successfully prevented the NCOPA from meeting. At the same time, the government began using a number of strategies to control the content of public opinion throughout the state. The regime used loopholes in the media law to curb press freedom and starve the opposition of any information outlets, while simultaneously attempting to frame members of the opposition like Fru Ndi of plotting with the most senior anglophone army officer, General James Tataw, to assassinate Biya. This accusation was intended to portray the opposition campaign as an anglophone plot against Cameroon’s francophone majority, and thus sow the seed of division within an opposition movement that had until this point been able to maintain cohesion among its ranks despite its linguistic and ethnic diversity.

The extent to which the government’s ‘divide and conquer’ tactics were responsible for any subsequent divisions among the political opposition during this period is debatable. Certainly, Cameroon’s history of linguistic and ethnic animosity had shaped much of the country’s politics prior to Biya’s efforts to foster division among his political opponents. So when cracks began to appear in the opposition alliance, it was difficult to accurately pinpoint

who was behind it, or ultimately responsible for it. Was it the government acting to undermine the opposition, or was it a consequence of internal power struggles resulting from the diverse ethno-linguistic differences among opposition leaders? While it is difficult to prove with any real certainty that Biya's regime played a crucial role in destabilizing the opposition, there were many instances in which the regime was more than happy to exploit such misunderstanding within the opposition and aggravate any schisms that emerged within the opposition's camp. For example, the CPDM government was able to help foster discord within the Cameroonian Peoples Union (UPC) during a leadership fight that plagued the party. By playing the incumbent leader, Prince Dika Akwa, against the two other contenders for the leadership of the party, the Biya government was able to help ensure a permanent split in one of the main parties that made up NCOPA (Mbaku and Takougang 2004: 445) Such actions were crucial in ensuring the unravelling of the anti-Biya coalition. Another tactic implemented by the government was the legalization of dozens of parties under the new law that guided the formation of political parties. These new parties with no specific political agenda or support base, and only served to split the opposition and dilute the message of change preached by the most powerful opposition groups.

Perhaps the single most devastating tactic employed by the Biya regime was the buying off of opposition leaders. In this regard, the CPDM government was able to make use of all the benefits of incumbency, including the extensive patronage reward system that had been in place since independence. The fact that throughout the transition process the government controlled all the potential revenue streams meant that it could dish out 'pork' to anyone willing to switch sides. The first party to accept the bribe from Biya was the Movement for the Defence of the Republic (MDR) after the March 1991 parliamentary election. The MDR accepted this patronage in exchange for forging an alliance with the CPDM, thereby providing the CPDM with a slim majority of 94 out of 188 seats in Parliament. In return, the MDR was given four cabinet posts (Takougang 2003: 430). With the main opposition party (the SDF) marginalized within Parliament because of a boycott it

conducted, the CPDM government with its junior partner, the MDR, was able to successfully navigate the final stages of Cameroon's democratic transition through the promulgation of laws that favoured the Biya regime. Other noticeable examples of buying off of opposition figures included the incorporation of prominent members of the NUDP party into the Biya government after the October 1992 election. With the NUDP's Vice-President Hamadou Mustapha and Secretary General Issa Tchiroma breaking ranks and joining the CPDM government, the leader of the NUDP, Bouba Bello Maigari, had no option but to follow suit. He was later appointed Minister of Industrial and Commercial Development in 1997. The Kodock faction of the UPC and the National Party for Progress of Antar Gassagay also left the ranks of the opposition and teamed up with the Biya regime in return for ministerial positions.

By the end of 1997, the Biya had successfully weakened the opposition and driven it into disarray. Apart from working frantically to co-opt and destroy the opposition, the Biya regime also embarked on building up its support base. As earlier mentioned, the Biya regime was quick to react to the opposition calls for multiparty democracy by encouraging the members of the ruling party to come out in force to denounce the opposition. With multiparty politics a reality in Cameroon by 1991, the government had to change its tactics and intensely rally its support base to counter NCOPA. No doubt, this was a very arduous task due to the high profile defections that were taking place not only within the country's opposition parties, but within the ranks of the ruling party, as well. Among those who left the CPDM was the party's "experienced strategist and elder statesman François Sengat Kuo," the youth leader Jean-Jacques Ekindi, and "the prominent women's wing leader and parliamentarian Victoria Tomedi Ndando" (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 108). To counter these defections, the approach chosen by Biya to revitalise the party's support base was the organisation of a national-wide tour, which he began in 1991. The planning of the tour was calculated to transmit different messages to different provincial capitals depending on the how much presence the opposition had on the ground. Hence his message in Douala was one of

defiance. The reason for this approach can be found in the fact that the opposition had claimed Douala to be its main base in the francophone part of the country and had vowed to disrupt any visit by the president. Also, most of the prominent defectors from the CPDM came from Douala. In Douala, the president began his speech with the now famous phrase: “Me voici donc à Douala! / So here I am in Douala” (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 138). This was a clear message both to the opposition and the militants of the ruling party that the Paul Biya was ready for a fight. In the other provincial capitals, Biya talked more about the government’s achievements in the area and attempted to distance himself and his government from the economic crisis facing the country at that time, instead placing blame on external dynamics like the volatility of the commodity markets on which Cameroon’s economy relied. This tactic had mixed results. The opposition continued to maintain a firm grip in those areas in which it had strong support, with the Biya government unable to successfully extend its actual power base beyond the three central provinces in which the president’s ethnic group was located. By 1992, the president realised that his survival depended to a large extent on his capacity to mobilize the Beti and enlist their wholehearted support for his presidency.

The major tool used by the Biya regime to mobilize his ethnic group was the constant rhetoric employed by him and other leaders of his party. The message was to awaken the people of his ethnic group to the potential threat posed by an opposition that was bent on wresting power from Yaounde (the heartland of the Betis) to Bamenda (the center of the country’s anglophone region). Basile Emah, the powerful government-delegate to the Yaoundé Urban Council and national treasurer of the CPDM, labelled the Opposition SDF as “L’ennemi...dans la maison/ The enemy in the house” (Mbaku and Takougang 2004: 434). Accusations levied on the opposition included claims that they were secessionists who were plotting to divide the country and unify the anglophone region of Cameroon with Nigeria. It was commonplace for most government and ruling party officials during that period to refer to the opposition as “Biafrans” – a clear allusion to the idea that they were a fifth column who were conspiring to take away power from the Betis. The regime also took pains to

reassure the country's Betis that the government would stand by them and ensure that they continue to maintain their privileged position on the national scene. The reassurance was the main theme of the speech given by President Biya during a stopover in Yaoundé as part of his nation-wide tour in 1991. During the Yaounde rally, he utter his famous line: "Tant que Yaounde respire, le Cameroun vit / As long as Yaounde breathers, Cameroon lives" (Cameroon Tribune 1991).

With the opposition's initial impetus subdued and external pressures reduced, the final part of the stage of Biya's strategy was the creation of a conducive atmosphere in which to ensure his victory in the multiparty elections. This conducive atmosphere involved giving Paul Biya maximum political advantage before and during any election. The first step in the regime's plan was to keep the management of the elections under its absolute control. In this regard, the regime resisted calls for the introduction of a new electoral code to replace the old one that had been written for one-party rule. In addition, calls by the opposition for an independent electoral commission fell on deaf ears, with the government maintaining that the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT) was competent enough to organise free and fair elections. This was likely not the case, given that most of those appointed by MINAT to control the electoral lists and polling places were public CPDM sympathizers (Takougang and Kriefer 1998: 143). Far from being unbiased bureaucrats, these agents of the ruling CPDM ensured that the voter and candidate registration process was flawed by employing many electoral malpractices, including "selective registration of voters, selective distribution of voters' cards, the rejection of candidates of the opposition parties, and failure to publish the electoral lists, polling stations, and parties contesting in each constituency" (Gros 2003: 140).

Beyond selective registration, the government electoral machine systematically rejected opposition electoral lists without any legal justification. The reaction of the opposition to these abuses did nothing to deter the government, but instead played into the government's hands. The decision by the SDF to boycott the March 1992 parliamentary

elections citing fraud and intimidation permitted the CPDM to control the National Assembly and hence determine the rules that were to govern future elections by drafting a constitution that favoured Paul Biya's incumbency. In the end, this meant that the outcome of the presidential elections, which happened in the fall of 1992, were by and large already determined, owing to the fact that the Biya regime was skilful in playing the opposition into its hands. In this regard, the plan to manipulate the elections to ensure Biya's victory must be seen in its larger context: it was not a haphazard or isolated strategy, but one that was built on a larger foundation of corruption and illiberalism, a culmination of meticulous planning that had accompanied Cameroon's tumultuous transition.

V. Conclusion

On 6 November 2007 Paul Biya celebrated his 25th year in power with pomp and fare (Musa, 2007). The celebration was completed when, a year later, Biya was able to prolong his stay in power beyond 2011 by changing the constitution to eliminate presidential term limits. By changing the constitution, Paul Biya guaranteed his place on the long roster of African presidents for life. What is interesting about this list, however, is that a majority of its members were part of the "class of 1990" – those who successfully negotiated and survived their countries' democratic transitions. Although the methods that each of these autocrats used to weather the political storm of the 1990s may have been different, all of them were able to outplay both the opposition and the international community (which was clamouring for a democratic makeover throughout the African continent). Does the success of autocrats like Biya point to an inherent weakness within the democratic enterprises that characterized much of sub-Saharan Africa? Surely, we cannot answer yes while accounting for the successful transitions within countries like Benin, Mali, and Niger. Structural weaknesses within certain countries – including the absence of an organised civil society to help construct a coherent platform to challenge the autocrat, along with the failure to build a unified opposition – have been put forward as more probable causes behind the failure of the

democratic transition process to take hold in those countries that never made the switch. Yet, those countries that did not successfully transition to democracy displayed several of the structural attributes of those countries that *did* make the switch. Therefore, we need to search for other plausible reasons that explain the survival of certain autocrats.

As the case of Paul Biya has demonstrated, the ability of an autocrat to survive the initial onslaught of the democratic current and then adapt later to the changing situation was crucial to his ability to maintain his grip on power. Biya and his party were able to tightly control the transition process in Cameroon. They were able to resist the call for a sovereign national conference, which would have levelled the playing field while eroding the power of incumbency. They were able to mix intimidation with the adoption of a wait-and-see attitude, and when that failed to work, they were flexible enough to go on the offence and co-opt the transition process to suit their own ends. The arrest and jailing of Yondo Black and the shooting of six people during the launching of the SDF constituted part of the intimidation tactics of the government. Biya succeeded in passing laws that only partially opened the democratic process, while setting timetables for elections that ultimately suited his own ends. The fact that Biya had full control over the mechanisms and institutions in charge of overseeing the elections meant that he was guaranteed a victory.

In the foregoing analysis, this work has revisited the voluntarist dimensions to understanding regime change (of the lack thereof). While most research on the determinants of regime change in sub-Saharan Africa have downplayed the role of human agency and instead focused more on structural conditionality, the case of Paul Biya and those of the other survivors of the 'class of 1990' call for a re-assessment of the agent-structure dichotomy. As the case of Paul Biya demonstrates, focusing solely on structural imperatives paints an incomplete picture of what was happening during the transition period and fails to explain divergent outcomes during the transition process in countries that had similar structural attributes. Developing new analytical tools that prioritise human agency in the study of regime change, will be crucial to informing policies that seek to deal with the succession

process that will, no doubt, affect many sub-Saharan countries in the near future, especially as nature (in the form of death from old age) comes knocking at the doors of the continent's lingering "Big Men."

Works Cited

- African Research Bulletin*. Economic Series 28, 11(November 16-December 15, 1991)
Exeter: Africa Research.
- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. "A Theory of Political Transitions." *American Economic Review* 91.4 (2001): 938.
- Amnesty International Report*. London, 1990
- Baker, Bruce. "The Class of 1990: How have the Autocratic Leaders of Sub-Saharan Africa Fared Under.." *Third World Quarterly* 19.1 (1998): 115-27.
- Bates, Robert H. "The Economics of Transitions to Democracy." *Political Science*. (March 1991): 24-27.
- Bratton, Michael, and Nicolas Van de Walle. *Democratic Experiments in Africa :Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge, U.K. ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Biya, Paul. *Communal Liberalism*. London and Reading: Macmillan Publisers, 1987
Cameroon Tribune. Yaounde, 1990-1993
- Freedom House. *Freedom in the World*. New York: Freedom House, 2008
<<http://www.freedomhouse.org>>
- Gros, Jean-Germain. *Cameroon :Politics and Society in Critical Perspective*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2003.
- Jackson, Robert H., and Carl Gustav Rosberg. *Personal Rule in Black Africa :Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- Joseph, Richard. "Democratization in Africa After 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives." *Comparative Politics* 29.3, Transitions to Democracy: A Special Issue in Memory of Dankwart A. Rustow (1997): 363-82.
- Mbaku, John Mukum, and Joseph Takougang, eds. *The Leadership Challenge in Africa: Cameroon Under Paul Biya*. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003.
- Mbu, Justice. *Civil Disobedience in Cameroon*. New England: iuniverse, 2006.
- McKesson, J. A. 1993. 'France and Africa: the evolving saga', *French Politics and Society* 11: 55-69.
- Musa, Tansa. "Cameroon L'État c'Est Biya?" *New African*.473 (2008): 22-3.
- Nurmikko, Sanna. "Survival of Political Leadership." *Economics Discussion Papers* 652
University of Essex, Department of Economics. (2008)
<<http://ideas.repec.org/p/esx/essedp/652.html>>
- Robinson, Pearl T. "The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36.3 (1994): 575-610.

Republic of Cameroon. Rights and Freedoms: Collection of Recent Texts. Sopecam.
Yaounde, 1991

Takougang, Joseph. "The 2002 Legislative Election in Cameroon: A Retrospective on Cameroon's Stalled Democracy Movement." The Journal of Modern African Studies 41 (2003): 421-435. EBSCOhost.

Takougang, Joseph, and Milton Krieger. African State and Society in the 1990s :Cameroon's Political Crossroads. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998.

West Africa, June 25-July 1 1990

WBI Governance and Anti-Corruption. "What are our origins?"
<http://go.worldbank.org/OW2OIPZ2G0>