



Local Government in AFRICA



Yaoundé, Cameroon: Photograph by PictureNET

Local government and decentralisation in Cameroon

As far back as 1986, the President of Cameroon acknowledged the need to introduce decentralisation in order to “make the people aware of their responsibilities and develop their sense of participation”. Little was implemented in this regard until the end of the century; even the emergence of an opposition movement at the end of the Cold War resulted in no more than gradual changes.

Drivers for decentralisation in Cameroon

From 2000 onwards international institutions urged the government of Cameroon to implement decentralisation as part of its efforts to achieve the cancellation of its international debts. The government responded with the introduction of the Laws on Decentralisation in 2004, which can only empower local authorities to become active players once financial and human resources are put at their disposal.

Constitutional background

Following the blueprint of French government institutions, Cameroon became independent with a highly centralised system of government in 1961. The Constitutions of 1961 and 1972 stressed the unitary nature of Cameroon, attempting to foster national unity between its anglophone and francophone parts and its more than 100 different ethnicities.

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The deconcentrated services of the national government are steered by the National Ministry for Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, its subnational representatives being the following:

- the Governors in the 10 provinces;
- the Prefects in the 58 divisions; and
- the SubPrefects in the various subdivisions (districts and arrondissements).

The task of these state representatives is twofold: on the one hand they are supposed to coordinate the activities of the line ministries in their areas, and on the other hand they supervise the activities of the decentralised territorial entities (DTEs).

Hierarchy of government structures

The Constitution of 1996 introduced the notion of a decentralised unitary state and the DTEs. According to the Constitution, both regions at the central level and local government at the lower level of government are DTEs.

There are currently 339 DTEs in Cameroon. They vary from rural entities with only a few thousand inhabitants to the national power centres of Douala and Yaoundé, with several million inhabitants each. The majority of local authorities are situated in rural areas where subsistence agriculture is the basis of local income. The regions are yet to be established. They should succeed the 10 provinces which are currently in place. The Constitution also provides for a Senate, intended to represent local interests at national level. However, it has not been established so far.

The local authorities are founded by presidential decree. Most of them came into existence after 1972. The Constitution of 1996 mentions local authorities, but the President has the power to create, merge and abolish them or to change their boundaries at will and at any time by presidential decree. In addition, on the basis of national legislation, the President names the heads of local governments in the most important cities.

Types of local government

Currently, there are four different types of local government in Cameroon:

- council unions (Douala and Yaoundé) consisting of five and six urban area councils respectively;
- nine councils under special administration; and
- 317 'ordinary' councils.

The President designates government delegates as heads of the council unions and of the councils under special administration. As the power base of the President's ruling party is in urban rather than rural areas, he thus ensures his tight grip on all major urban areas. Only the 'ordinary' councils are entitled to elect their mayors themselves.

Local government elections

Between the installation of a one-party state system of government in Cameroon in 1966 and the first democratic local government elections in 1996, all local councillors were in effect named by the ruling party and the mayors hand-picked by the President. The second democratic local government elections took place in 2002 and further elections are due later in 2007. But even the introduction of democratic elections has not resulted in a significant diversity of parties in local councils. This is mainly due to a rigid list-oriented electoral system which favours big parties by granting a party all seats in a local council if it

gains more than 50% of the votes cast. In addition, parties gaining less than 5% of the votes cast do not receive seats at all. Consequently, only five parties are currently represented in the local councils throughout Cameroon.

The President's party, the long-ruling RDPC (Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais), is the only party that has countrywide representation in local councils. The electoral system has given the RDPC an overwhelming majority in local councils. Currently, 85% of mayors in Cameroon are members of the RDPC.

The mayors of 'ordinary' local councils are elected from among the councillors at the beginning of their term for a period of five years. They receive no salaries to allow them to carry out their functions full-time. This has led to widespread mismanagement and a multitude of corruption cases.

Supervision by the state government

Following the French system of government, local government in Cameroon is subject to supervision by the state government. In strict hierarchical order, the National Ministry for Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, the Governors, the Prefects and the SubPrefects have extensive influence over the activities of local government. For example, a council budget requires the assent of the Governor, all acts issued by the mayor are scrutinised by the Prefect and the incurring of certain expenses even requires the countersignature of the Prefect and/or the Governor. In cases of misconduct, the different levels of supervision may nullify acts of local government and step in with their own decisions, going as far as suspending a local council or replacing a mayor.

Role of local government

In general, local government only fulfils functions which the National Ministry for Territorial Administration and Decentralisation and national line ministries active at the local level deem appropriate. This is due to the fact that the local authorities lack financial and human resources, so they are only able to take actions in limited areas if they receive support from the national government to perform specific services. For example, local authorities are responsible for keeping registers relating to the civil status of inhabitants. They issue birth and death certificates and mayors have the power to perform marriages.

Planning and budgeting

The local councils prepare their annual budgets outlining their planned activities for the forthcoming year. Draft budgets require the assent of the organs of state supervision. Approximately 25% of the 339 councils of Cameroon have already undergone the exercise of preparing multi-annual development plans for their areas. The national government, in cooperation with international donor organisations, is attempting to spread instruments of local planning throughout Cameroon.

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Traditional authorities

The relationship between local government and traditional authorities, which play an important role in most parts of Cameroon, has neither been clarified nor legalised. Thus, where informal cooperation between these two authorities is not intact, local government cannot fulfil its functions properly.

Financing local government

Local government in Cameroon is chronically underfunded. In 2004, the overall budget of local authorities amounted to approximately FCFA35 billion, which is equivalent to •53.53 million (R509 million), compared to debts of FCFA190 billion (•289.20 million / R2.75 billion). The funds at the disposal of local authorities constitute less than 1% of Cameroon's GDP and less than 5% of the country's national budget.

In the majority of councils of Cameroon, enormous debts and inappropriately high personnel costs leave no room to manoeuvre; local investment projects are scarce. However, insubstantial investment spending by local government is in line with what is happening at the national level of government. This is largely due to a lack of qualified personnel: both levels of government have only a limited capacity to absorb funds in order to realise investment projects.

Local authorities have very limited financial resources of their own because national legislation allows them to levy fees and taxes in certain specified areas only. The more important revenue-producing matters falling within

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the area of competence of the local authorities are waste disposal, markets, public lighting, public space usage, advertising, building permits and water supply. Most of these sources are related to local services which require a level of organisation and personnel which only larger local authorities possess. Typically, therefore, smaller and rural local authorities have no access to such resources.

The main part of the resources at the disposal of the local authorities is channelled to them by means of FEICOM (Fonds d'Equipement et d'Intervention Intercommunale), which acts as a communal bank distributing state resources and giving loans to local authorities. FEICOM has undergone several reforms since it was founded as a national institution in 1972. Following serious acts of mismanagement and corruption over several years, FEICOM is currently under scrutiny with a view to being reformed yet again. The importance of the resources provided by FEICOM is underlined by the fact that they amount to 70% to 80% of the overall revenues of local authorities in rural areas. For approximately 100 of the 339 local authorities, the payments by FEICOM represent more than 95% of their revenues.

Following the passing of the 2004 Laws on Decentralisation, the financial situation of the local authorities has not improved. The means put at their disposal were even reduced in 2005 and 2006. The majority of rural councils in Cameroon with less than 30,000 inhabitants have annual budgets of less than FCFA120 million (•182,900 / R1.74 million).

2004 Laws on Decentralisation

After more than four years of preparatory work, the parliament of Cameroon passed three laws on decentralisation in 2004. They establish a framework

for decentralisation and make provision for the devolution of powers to local authorities in the economic, social, health, educational, cultural and sports development areas. The supervising authority of state institutions at various levels has been slightly reduced as a result of the law.

However, mayors argue that an opportunity has been missed to streamline supervision procedures to make them more efficient and limit possible state intervention in local government affairs. In addition, knowledge of the content of the laws is still limited among both mayors and supervising authorities and thus they are not yet often applied at the local level. To the frustration of mayors, the state has not allocated further financial means and personnel to local authorities to enable them to fulfil their new functions. Thus the 2004 laws on decentralisation remain a hollow shell up to today. Relief for local government in the form of the financial means urgently required to give life to the laws of 2004 is currently not in sight.

Comment

As a result of the continuing dominance of the ruling RDPC in Cameroon, no substantial changes in the distribution of councillor seats and mayoral posts are expected to follow the local government elections to be held in the summer of 2007.

The National Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation is in the process of preparing several laws and by-laws to implement decentralisation in Cameroon. From the perspective of local government, the distribution of more financial means and greater financial independence from the state government are the most pressing issues at stake. Following the international community's decision in April 2006 to cancel some of Cameroon's international debts, the pressure from international donor institutions to implement decentralisation is diminishing. Thus it remains uncertain whether the government will finally take a decisive step towards enabling local government to assume the role assigned to it by the Constitution of 1996 and the Laws on Decentralisation.

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