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## The Power and Peril of the Opposition in Transition Societies of Africa after 1990: Cameroon's Experience

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### Abstract:

*The study argues that democratic transitions represent key political moments in the political life of emerging opposition. These are moments when the political reputation and legitimacy of the pre-established regime is likely to plummet giving a political opportunity for the opposition to emerge and use appropriate political skills to threaten the very foundation and survival of undemocratic regimes. Using the example of the State of Cameroon from the late 80s to early 90s, it finds that three key factors contributed to the emergence of Cameroon's opposition. First, a context favourable to democracy; second, the ability of the opposition to develop appropriate political capabilities; and third a political behaviour that is most attractive to (potential) supporters. This finding suggests that the power of the opposition is not only limited to the personal abilities and capabilities of the individual activist but also the ability to take advantage of the context in which democracy is emerging. This conclusion is drawn from an observation of the circumstances and political action of Cameroon's pioneer opposition leader after 1990 herein named John Fru Ndi.*

**Keywords:** *Opposition, power peril, transition societies, personal ability/capability*

### 1. Introduction

Political historians retain the period from late 80s to early 90s as a turning point in the political history of most undemocratic societies. Samuel Huntington (1996) has classified societies under this category as *Third Wave*. African societies were not an exception. In Cameroon a strong opposition emerged under the leadership of men with strong appetite for change. The objective of this study is to examine the conditions under which the opposition in transition societies emerge and survive. There is no single incentive to the political emergence and engagement of the opposition in transition moments. Apart from the democratic environment that is naturally said to be favourable to the emergence of the opposition, individual political capability and desired political behaviour also play a fundamental role. Democratic opportunism refers to the presence of an environment that is favourable to democracy. Capability is the political skill of being able to be singled out as an opposition activist and desired behaviour is the expressed political attitude that is expected by the majority.

This article is divided into the following parts: part one describes transition societies and focuses on societies of the early 90s in Africa. Part two makes the case for incentives to opposition activism in transition societies by examining the concepts of democratic opportunism, individual capabilities and desired behaviour. Part three operationalizes the concepts in the previous parts by analyzing the events that led to the emergence of a strong opposition in Cameroon with focus on John Fru Ndi.

### 2. Key Concepts

#### 2.1. Transition Societies

What are transition societies? How do we distinguish a transition State from a stable or non-transition State? What kinds of transitions are found in States? Transition States are States that are undergoing some form of transformation or change. The transformation is said to be fundamental because it is substantial and penetrates the most significant fabrics of society. The change is one that is felt by the State and society outside the State. Usually, fundamental changes in societies are accompanied by a substantial or total replacement of the status quo or fundamental pre-established norms and institutions. Another important characteristic about States in transition is that they are marred with some form of crisis. The crisis occurs as a result of the clash between the values of those who are for change and those who are against change. In fact, a transition State is one in which an emerging elite challenges pre-established norms and institutions by activating public sentiments and feelings for change. A transition State is also determined by the end product of the transition process itself. The purpose of some transitions is to become democracy or vice versa. However, it is worthy to note that not all transitions end up meeting the original purpose for which they were initiated. Some transitions which are aimed to dismantle an authoritarian regime for a democratic one can, under certain circumstances, produce a stronger and more exclusive regime i.e. a dictatorship. In any case, most transitions aim at establishing more liberal States. The transition can be from a traditional political system to a modern political system (Huntington,

1968:144). In this light, a traditional society or traditional political system in transition is one in which the forces of modernization emerge and challenge traditional norms and institutions. Modernization, which is the process of transition, entails policy innovation, social and economic reformation by State action (Huntington, 1968:140). In short, change in traditional societies is the process through which these societies get modernized usually by means of replacing traditional values and behaviour patterns, the expansion of communications and education, the broadening of loyalties from family, village, and tribe to nation, the secularization of public life, the rationalization of authority structures, the promotion of functionally specific organizations, the substitution of achievement criteria for ascriptive ones, and the furthering of a more equitable distribution of material and symbolic resources (Ibid).

This form of transition is drawn from the theory of political development which emphasizes functional role differentiation as a major political achievement of political systems said to be modern (Almond and Coleman, 1960). Although I acknowledge the contribution of modernization theorists, I wish to add that it will be more instructive to think of the role played by modernizing activists and reformers in the process of transition from a traditional to a modern political system. In addition, one should not be made to think that the transition from a traditional political system to a modern one is an end to itself. The nature of the so called modern political system is also significant. Although, a general functional-role differentiation exists in modern political systems, it is important to bear in mind that these functions are fulfilled by different kinds of political regimes including totalitarian, authoritarian, dictatorships, and democratic or even hybrid regimes. This is to say that a transition society can also be one in which a modern State moves back and forth between dictatorship, authoritarianism, and democracy.

Transition from dictatorship to democracy, from single-party rule to multi-party democracy, from democracy to the consolidation of democracy has been the focus of most scholarly works in the last two decades. The *Third Wave* literature is fundamentally interested in these forms of transition. In Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, the dominant type of transition is that from modern-dictatorial to democratic-reluctant State. The *Third Wave* for most African States after 1990 meant a movement from a state of modern dictatorship to that of reluctant democracy. Regime change in the continent involved a fundamental realignment of rules governing the distribution of power between the holders of public office and the collectivity of citizens (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:31). Whatever the case, pro-democracy activists played a significant role in the process by which transition States in Africa after 1990 became substantial or reluctant democracies. Thus, the nexus between transition societies and democracy is that the opposition took advantage of the democratic opportunities available to activate public sentiments and feelings for democratic reforms. In the process, the leading opposition activists emerged and challenged unprepared governmental elite. In Cameroon, events leading to the emergence of the opposition SDF and its chairman show that the ruling elite at the time was ill-prepared, unprepared, reluctant or unwilling to democratize.

This is where the power of the opposition comes in. According to Bratton and van de Walle (1997:31) the prospects for regime transition derive in the first instance from the actors, organizations, and institutions that inhabit the national arena. Although little has been documented about the role of the opposition in pressing for democratic reforms, a balance or bias free account of transition to democracy in the continent requires a thorough examination of these local actors, including the environment in which they operate as well as the capacity and ability to make shrewd use of the opportunities to rise to positions of political prominence.

## 2.2. Power and Peril

Political sociologists understand power as the ability to get things done even without the willingness of those doing it or prevent them from having you to do what they want. Power is said to be exerted on a political system when that system finds itself compelled to introduce reforms it would not have introduced in the absence of that influencer. In such a case the political system is introducing reforms with reluctance in which case power can be said to have been exerted efficiently. The opposition is therefore said to be powerful, when it succeeds to coerce the ruling government introduce reforms that more or less reflect its aspirations so that at the end of the day, it shall be seen that such reforms are the products of the opposition and not the ruling government which was initially unwilling to do so. The opposition is said to be powerful when popular feelings and sentiments converge towards it giving it the legitimacy it needs to coerce governmental authorities.

Peril suggests moments when power is at risk of collapse or is in danger of losing a substantial component. It is the contention of this paper that the power of the opposition is at its peak in transition moments because of the diminishing support for the ruling government. However, it is also its contention that such power is not sustainable because of cracks in the self same opposition and its inability to control the fundamental power mechanisms of the state (executive, judiciary, legislative structures). The peril of the opposition is reflected in its failure or difficulty to overthrow existing political structures or those governing them. The opposition might have been able to compel government introduce reforms (which is expression of power) but unable to access governmental position through elections or other means to oversee the effective implementation of such reforms (peril). Elections organized after the early 90s reveal massive incumbent reelection leaving the opposition with no other option than to become (passive) overseer of governmental action. Thus the power of the opposition is short-lived and limited to transition period when it succeeds to exert pressure on government for democratic reforms.

## 2.3. Political Capability

Political capability is one of the approaches found to be suitable in the study of political activism in transition societies. This approach is concerned about life cycle and its influence on the ability of people to be able or not to do

something. It focuses on what people are effectively able to do and to be, not just about wishes and desires. It is an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and theorizing about basic social justice (Nussbaum, 2011:18). From this perspective, it holds that the key questions to ask when comparing societies and assessing them for their basic decency or justice is "What is each person able to do and to be?" According to Sen (1993:30) the capability approach to a person's advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve various valuable functioning as a part of living. Furthermore, the corresponding approach to social advantage—for aggregative appraisal as well as for the choice of institutions—takes the set of individual capabilities as constituting an indispensable and central part of the relevant informational base of such evaluation. The basic advantage of this approach is that it is human development-oriented. Its advantage to the study of pro-democracy activism is that it focuses on choice or freedom. Nussbaum (2011:18) holds that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people may or may not exercise in action: the choice is theirs. Thus it encourages self-awareness, self-definition and self-determination. It is also concerned with entrenched social injustices and inequality that is sometimes the result of discrimination and marginalization in poorly managed plural societies. Still in the words of Nussbaum (2011:19), the approach logically ascribes an urgent task to government and policy which is to improve the quality of life of all people as defined by their capability.

Capabilities are among the practical abilities involved in political work roles, which are either inherent in the person or developed through practice. To perform the standards expected in politics, individuals require more than certain levels of understanding; they require capabilities. Political capabilities are the practical political skills or competences that individuals need to achieve required political performance. Political capabilities could be acquired through political socialization (i.e. the process of induction into politics). The necessary pre-condition are that the opposition needs knowledge about political issues, they need to be politically motivated and be able to communicate to a political audience in order to raise peoples' awareness, appetite and subsequent engagement in politics. These capabilities are used to realise the goal of establishing a welfare and free society by reinventing people's appetite, sentiment and emotions for a better society. Capabilities are all about the key attributes desired and expected of performant political actors. Capability is not only a fundamental entitlement (Nussbaum, 2003); capability is also the foundation of political strategy in transition societies.

#### *2.4. Desired Political Behaviour*

The desired behaviour approach to the study of political activism is also critical. Any political entrepreneur in political competition is expected to behave in way that is consistent with the expectation of the majority in order to win political support. The concept of desired behaviour can explain to a large extent why some political activists succeed to bring about desired change and others do not. The political activist is expected to preach by example—let what he or she promotes as value be reflected in their attitude.

As a significant determinant of political performance, desired political behaviour is understood in terms of forming attitudes, developing accepted social skills, or increasingly developing emotional intelligence (EI). Political attitudes are the settled ways of thinking and feeling about someone or something. Specifically, political attitudes refer to perceptions and orientations about the political world such as political adversaries/enemies, political leaders, political institutions, political issues, etc. The orientation could be positive or negative. It is on the basis of the orientation that the opposition is able to determine the course of action. For example, if the orientation towards incumbent regime and institutions is negative, the course of action is likely to be oppositional and challenging. If the perception is positive, the course of action is likely to reflect a supportive pattern. EI is the understanding and controlling of emotions in order to act effectively in sociopolitical situations.

What these different constructs have in common is a shared concern with acknowledging and making transparent the affective influences on behaviour in sociopolitical situations. To get the desired forms of behaviour in transition societies, the opposition *must* develop the right kinds of attitudes, soft skills and EI. The ways opposition performs in political roles are determined not only by what they know, explicitly or tacitly, or what they can do, basically or expertly, but also by how they feel. The way the opposition actually performs can vary significantly, even if they have similar levels and types of capabilities.

### **3. The Emergence of John FRU NDI as Opposition in the 90s**

This section is concerned is about how individuals actually become opposition activists in a general context of transition. It focuses on John Fru Ndi who remarkably launched a political party in Bamenda, his home town under conditions that were not supportive of multiparty democracy. I argue that in transition societies, opposition activism was expressed in the forceful launching of opposition parties. I also examine the political consequences of the emergence of the John Fru Ndi and his party, the SDF.

#### *3.1. The State of Cameroon as a Society in Transition*

Cameroon State and society were in transition from the late 80s to 90s. As a State in transition, Cameroon was under both internal and external pressure to introduce inclusive political reforms in the 90s. Before then, a single-party system was in operation in that country. The Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) was the only party in operation and to which all Cameroonians were compelled to adhere.

Externally, the foreign partners to Cameroon conditioned their support and aid for poor countries on the introduction of liberal political reforms. Internally, the perceptibly poor socioeconomic condition was instrumentalised by

local democratic activists to demand political openness. As a matter of fact, the French President, Francois Mitterrand made a pro-democracy speech in La Baule on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1990 in which he conditioned French aid to African countries to the efforts to introduce multiparty democracy. It should be noted that France is the traditional economic partner of Cameroon and the State of Cameroon strongly depends on France to survive. In short, by the end of the 80s, the global or international environment on which Africa relies for economic and political survival became supportive of democratization (Wiseman 1995:4).

Internally, pressure for multiparty democracy came from the administrative regions of the Littoral where it was championed by Yondo Black, a prominent Barrister and member of the Cameroon Bar Association (CBA) and of course the North West, where it was championed by John Fru Ndi, a bookstore dealer. These political activists were challenged by a category of anti-democracy activists. In the midst of rising demands for multiparty democracy, another category of activists emerged and staged protest marches against the introduction of multiparty democracy. In Yaounde, the political capital city, marches were staged by some members of the ruling CPDM party in support of the status quo. Similar marches were organised in Bamenda, the capital of the North West region and national opposition stronghold.

In response to the pressure, the President of the Republic signed a series of liberty decrees in December 1990. Of particular significance was Law No. 90/056 that laid the legal and institutional framework for multiparty politics and created procedures for new parties. Many political parties emerged but the SDF which was launched in May 1990, emerged as the major opposition party. Multiparty presidential, parliamentary and local elections were then expected to be the framework for a routine political activity. However, the SDF has never won any of the presidential elections though some local government areas were won to it, particularly in the North West, its stronghold.

### 3.2. *The trajectory of John Fru Ndi*

Historians and political scientists will remember John Fru Ndi as the man who initiated the first assertive opposition movement in Cameroon after 1990 that led to significant changes in favour of democracy. He launched the SDF party in Bamenda amidst a crowd and in the presence of security forces and emerged as the opposition leader in Cameroon politics. However, knowing about John Fru Ndi is also investigating his life cycle in order to identify actual sources of power. As already highlighted in the previous section, opposition activists are expected to combine individual capabilities, desired behaviour in an environment favourable to democracy for political action to make a difference.

Some elements in the life cycle of John Fru Ndi indicate that he was somehow predestined to become a political leader. The life cycle of political activists show that accumulation and redistribution are key determinants of meaningful political action.<sup>i</sup> Accumulation is the process by which social capital for political dispensation is acquired. Redistribution is the process of gaining political support by sharing out proceeds accumulated overtime. Most political activists in transition societies of Africa followed this pattern. This model is not quite different from the standard socioeconomic model of Verba and his colleagues (1978, 1972). According to the model, high socioeconomic status correlates positively with active engagement in politics. The individual's decision to participate depends on his social circumstances—the set of social characteristics that defines his life space, where he lives, what he does for a living, his education, his race, and so forth (Verba and Nie, 1972:19). Another important point raised by Verba and his colleagues is the nexus between life cycle and political action. One's position in the life cycle affects rates of activism. In the early years as one reaches voting age, activism is usually low, rises during the middle years and declines in later years (Verba and Nie, 1972:138). This pattern is explained by what Verba and his colleagues call the problems of "start up" and "slow down". They explain that in the early years one has the problem of startup—individuals are still unsettled; they are likely to be residentially and occupationally mobile. They have yet to develop the stake in the politics of a particular locality that comes with extended residence, with home ownership, with children in school, and the like. In addition, they face the specific legal obstacles to voting associated with short residence. In later years, the problem is one of slow down. Old age, they argue brings with it sociological withdrawal as individuals retire from active employment and it brings as well physical infirmities and fatigue that lower the rate of political activity (Verba and Nie, 1972:139)<sup>ii</sup>. Indeed, concern for politics and eventual actual engagement is not very much a preoccupation among younger people because their dominant concern is about starting an occupation and a family. However, it is important to note that the age factor does not really determine the ability of an individual to be politically active or to retire from politics. What counts most for local activists is the degree of concern they have for politics, the sense of efficacy, the political issue at stake, and their capabilities to salvage the political process. It could even be that the older one grows, the more involved politically one becomes. African leaders are on record for not wanting to quit active political position—instead, they do all it takes to remain in power. Old age comes with feelings of insecurity, isolation, and idleness given that one has retired from active life. Thus, it could be said that the older one becomes, or when one retires from active employment, engagement in politics is likely to substitute idleness, solace and isolation that could be the outcome of retirement from active socio-professional service. What appears to be significant is the amount of social capital accumulated overtime and the ability to use it for political action, no matter the age.

#### 3.2.1. From Childhood to Adulthood

John Fru Ndi was born on July 7, 1941, at Baba II in Santa subdivision to Joseph Ndi and Susana Angoh. Some of his sympathisers claim that the prefix 'Ni' added to his name in Baba custom is used to respect village elders while 'Fru' in Baba means 'follower of twins' (Gwellem, 1996:41). He acquired knowledge on custom and tradition as he grew with his parents. Through this process, he got socialised into the traditional norms and customs of the North West people, and this was a necessary instrument of recognition by and identification with the people of the region. It has been argued that there is a positive correlation between formal educational background and involvement in politics (Verba et al. 1978, Verba and

Nie 1972, Parry et al. 1992). The higher one's level of Western formal education, the greater the potentials of fitting squarely well in the political realm. Fru Ndi may not have obtained the highest university certificate which according to this theory would have endowed him with greater and additional incentive to political success. But his primary education which began in 1952 at Baforchu Basel mission School, through to Santa N.A School in 1954 where he completed standard six, endowed him with skills to identify and interpret signs and symbols. In 1957, he obtained the elementary First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC). Testimony also holds that while in school, he used to be school head boy. Three years later, he travelled to Nigeria where he enrolled at the Lagos City College, a secondary grammar school operating a four-year course. However, surviving conditions there were not the best for him. That is why he resorted to 'odd' jobs like garden caring, kitchen boy, cook Stewart and baby sitting in order to sponsor or partly sponsor his education. In 1960, John Fru Ndi secured a job at Ikeja Airport in Lagos with a company called the West Coast Fisheries Company. He was later awarded a scholarship by Aero Contractors to do piloting at Zaira Flying School. Unfortunately for him at the time, the Biafra war that escalated caused him to pre-maturely end the piloting and return to Cameroon for safety. He had during his stay in Nigeria gained some experience about the lives of other nationals and was at the same time a witness to the political circumstances that led to the outbreak of hostilities between Northern Nigerians and Western Ibo Nigerians. He therefore had knowledge no matter how shallow of what inter-ethnic conflict was all about.

Once in Bamenda, his home town capital, he hawked apples, bananas, sugarcane, and fried and sold groundnuts. He then, set up the Bameho Vegetable Society which used to be situated around present day Bamenda main market. As a parallel business activity, Fru Ndi involved in the buying and selling of newspapers and magazines. The newspaper business appeared to be more lucrative and enjoyable to him. He became the sole agent for *Cameroon Times* and *Cameroon Outlook* in the North West and later, opened his own newspaper kiosk somewhere along the commercial avenue of Bamenda. This kiosk was later transformed into a bookshop popularly known as Ebibi Book Centre. It is at this juncture that Fru Ndi created high and low acquaintances and contacts with a wide spectrum of Cameroonians, carefully monitored public opinion and sampled widespread grievances and discontent against the ruling government (Gwellem, 1996:42). Accumulation at this level took the form of acquiring knowledge about people's grievances. This stock of knowledge had to be used for political dispensation. To be precise, with knowledge of people's grievances against incumbent, he was able to criticise the regime in a bit to win political support. The following testimony is revealing of the extent to which Ebibi Book Centre opened up Fru Ndi to people and knowledge about them: I admired his strictness in business and his principles and rare gift of common sense...At Ebibi Book Centre 'Knock and enter' was the sign on the door. At any given moment, there were no less than five people discussing with him. His office was festooned with slogans and epigrams. John F. Kennedy and slain civil rights leader, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s photographs hung conspicuously in his living room<sup>iii</sup>

### 3.2.2. Building Political Networks

There were several ways in which John Fru Ndi demonstrated redistribution in order to gain social recognition. In the sports domain and football in particular, he became president of PWD Football club which was the only first division team in the North West at the time. Considering the attachment Cameroonians have for football; almost becoming opium, Fru Ndi as president of a North West-based football club easily caught the attention of the North westerners especially as he strove for the success of the team by feeding the players from his pocket. This act has caused him to be re-elected several times as president of that team. When asked if he regretted having spent time and money for PWD, Fru Ndi said "No, I learnt a lot on how to manage and lead people" (Gwellem, 1996:43).

John Fru Ndi initiated a cultural and development association of Baba II and served as president. Between 1987 and 1988, he was member and president of Lion's Club International (Bamenda Branch) and even attended the Lion's Club Convention in the USA in 1988.

His generosity some observers closer to him report transcends ethnic, political and religious cleavages. From some of the proceeds from the bookshop business, Fru Ndi made donations to Manyemen and Mbingo leprosy centres including the Njinikom orphanage. Some colleges that equally received gifts from him are Sacred Heart College Mankon, Our Lady of Lourdes College Mankon, Presbyterian Secondary School and Cameroon Protestant College (CPC) Bali, Longla Comprehensive College (LCC), City College of Commerce (CCC) Mankon, and Baptist College Njinikejem in Kom.

Back in 1984, reports Gwellem (1996), John Fru Ndi was making inquiries among youths particularly active students about the type of government they would like to prefer for Cameroon. He investigated and recorded the grievances and as he puts it "I could foresee that he (Fru Ndi) was preparing himself for active politics". In redistributing this manner, the future North West gladiatorial politician and local activist was slowly but surely garnering popularity.

### *3.3. Opposition Activism Proper: The Launching of the SDF*

The idea to launch what became the dominant opposition party in Cameroon politics after 1990 began as revival of what its 'founding fathers' call the marginalization of an Anglophone minority. It started through a series of contacts and meetings initiated by its founding members. From inception, the initiators intended to form a group that will defend the rights of the Anglophone communities of the North West and South West Regions by exposing human rights violations and discrimination to the United Nations Organisation (UNO) and the governments of the USA and Britain. The initiators who call themselves "Study Group 89" convened their first meeting to that effect on November 11, 1989 at the Presbyterian Church Centre in Mankon-Bamenda. Apart from John Fru Ndi, other prominent members who attended this first contact include Clement Ngwasiri and Siga Asanga. The outcome of this meeting was a recommendation to a Yaoundé-based branch of the same group to prepare a memo to be submitted to the UNO exposing discrimination against Anglophones.

On December 1, 1989, as a team, John Fru Ndi, Siga Asanga, Carlson Anyangwe, Nyo Wakai, Akuchu and Clement Ngwasiri in a meeting at the Yaoundé Bastos-based residence of Siga Asanga concluded unopposed that Cameroon Anglophones had a problem. Foreign government representatives to whom the project was submitted appreciated the work of the group but requested that it be identified officially with a recognised leadership. Here, the intention was that the group becomes a specialised structure to articulate the interest defended. The next meeting held in John Fru Ndi's residence in Ntarinkon-Bamenda on February 17, 1990 was to discuss the modalities of giving the group a specialised structure or transforming it into a political party as advised by foreign embassies.

In line with the process of party formation, the Yaoundé group was recommended to work out proceedings for the establishment of the party's constitution. The name of the party was also debated in the meeting. Although the members agreed that the words 'democracy' and 'social' should feature in the party's name, they however disagreed over the following proposed names: Social Democratic Party (SDP), Federal Democratic Party (FDP) and National Democratic Party (NDP). They were rejected because they directly or indirectly reflected appellations adopted in other countries like Nigeria. On Carlson Anyangwe's suggestion however, the name Social Democratic Front (SDF) was finally adopted and a document presented by Justice Nyo Wakai entitled "The new Social Order for Cameroon" was adopted as the party's manifesto. The document was adopted after corrections brought to it by Albert Mukong (a veteran political activist) and Vincent Feko also present at the meeting. A suggestion was raised by Albert Mukong and Vincent Feko that they merge with another group present in Douala with whom they were in contact and undertaking similar move. The idea was left out by the majority on grounds that the Douala group was made of unknown persons. This meeting marked the first and informal phase of the birth of the SDF. The next task was to make the party officially recognised: an uphill and arduous task. This was particularly difficult in a context of a strong and capricious State that considered any attempt to oppose government in words, omissions and actions subversive. If they must succeed they must accept and face this reality. The only way as they thought and saw it was to openly defy the ruling government.

### 3.3.1. Governmental Reaction

Once the idea of the SDF was born, the next step was to have it officially recognised as a party. Although in theory, the Constitution of 1972 permitted the formation of political associations; in practice the law on subversion scared many from undertaking such an initiative. The constitution was therefore porous and ambiguous; setting both a *floor* and *ceiling* on participation.<sup>iv</sup> It never suppressed the law on the freedom to form political associations and at the same time, it cautioned against attempts to disintegrate the State by opposing government. This was the dilemma that SDF members and the government authorities confronted. Each in the framework attempted to use the law to justify action. Inasmuch as it was the right of John Fru Ndi and his colleagues to form a political association, it was also the obligation of government to control the process but also to suppress any attempt that could jeopardise the unity and integrity of the nation. It was on March 16, 1990 that Fru Ndi and his colleagues filed a request to competent administrators demanding official recognition of the party according to the law on political associations. This request which also bore the signature of Dr. Siga Asanga specified that following the Law on political associations, they (signatories) are demanding that competent authorities register the party as new political organisation and according to the same law; it was their right to make such a request. In fact, it was a demand for an authorisation to launch the party.

The Minister of Territorial Administration, Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya and the competent authority to grant such authorisation was caught by panic and indecision when he received the file (Gwellem, 1996:3). According to foreign press sources, President Paul Biya who learned of it blamed his minister for failing to stop the multiparty initiative earlier and also for failing to reply (Gwellem, 1996:4). The same source reports that the Head of State secretly dispatched to Bamenda top intermediaries to "appeal to those behind the new opposition party that the expenditure they had incurred, would be reimbursed plus a generous offer of government appointments to SDF leaders" (Ibid.); an offer reported to have been denied by John Fru Ndi. Whatever the situation, the truth is that the government was caught unawares and it was strategically logical for it to take pre-emptive measures against the launching of the SDF.

### 3.3.2. The Launching Proper

The deadlock between governmental authorities and the launchers meant that the later had to think of another strategy. John Fru Ndi took up the first move to challenge the regime by issuing a press release No. 2/90 declaring that Saturday, May 26, 1990 at 2:00 pm was to be the final day and time when the party shall be launched with or without government authorisation. According to the press release, the launching will take the form of a rally march from City Chemist Roundabout to the Bamenda Municipal Stadium, where speeches will be held followed by the distribution of the party's manifesto. Informed of the situation, Augustin Tchoussanou, Divisional Officer (DO) for Bamenda subdivision warned SDF officials against organising an unauthorised rally. The warning was issued following the silence over the issue by Magloire Nguimba, Governor of the North West and Arampe Emmanuel Tabe, Senior Divisional Officer (Prefet) of Mezam Division. The Minister of Territorial Administration, the Governor of the North West, the Prefect of Mezam and the DO of Bamenda central subdivision were all caught in a web of indecision; each fearing to bear the responsibility over the organization of an event which will challenge the regime and probably have disastrous consequences on their position. Perhaps that explains why the activists were encouraged the more. However, to put an end on the administrative impasse over the issue, Augustin Tchoussanou acting on behalf of the administration issued on May 24, 1990, a ban on any rally to take place on Saturday, May 26, 1990 and declared that such a rally will be illegal. This ban was an alert on a potential use of force should it be violated.

The authorities threatened to use force as last resort over an argumentative discourse. Troops were mobilised around areas where the rally was to take place. This was a pre-emptive measure to intimidate and prevent the launching. Popular markets such as Ntarinkon and Mankon were closed. These measures, argued the authorities were in a bit to prevent the upsurge of lawlessness and disturbance which the constitution interprets as violating the principles of peace and stability. According to eyewitness accounts, by Friday 25<sup>th</sup>, May 1990, Bamenda resembled very much a town under siege. Nevertheless, the threat of use of force did not deter SDF leaders from pursuing their plan and did not also scare the population from turning up massively during the rally. Reporting on how prepared and daring the launchers were, Jerome Gwellem (1996:6) writes that:

The premise of the Presidency (Residence of John Fru Ndi) was a beehive of activity. Cooking was everywhere in the foreground and the backyard. Slogans were being written on placards. Some outstanding personalities were already there, Fru Ndi, Justice Wakai. Dr. Siga Asanga and other leaders had gone to meet and put finishing touches to the launching programme. Most of the people present were drawn from a wide spectrum: academics, lawyers, accountants, businessmen, doctors, traditional notables, and young people. As I was ushered in to seat by staunch SDF adherents, my question was answered. The SDF will be launched come hell or high water tomorrow.

In a last crisis meeting around midnight at John Fru Ndi's residence, it was decided that the party be launched at Ntarinkon Park given that those sites formerly declared to harbour the launching were sealed by troops. In any case, everything was set for the launching.

### 3.3.3. May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1990 and the Political Emergence of John Fru Ndi

The project of SDF was widely supported not only by some elite but also by the local population. This massive support which was visible on the eve of the launching as many had gathered around the compound of John Fru Ndi inspired him. He saw that he was vested with a political messianic mission. The support gave him a feeling of political efficacy. The desire by John Fru Ndi to make history and to be remembered as the first figure to significantly defy the regime was a galvanizing force. Such a desire inevitably maximised courage and minimized fear. Responding to one of those present on the eve of the launching who asked to know whether he will still dare launch the party despite the presence of troops, John Fru Ndi had this to say: "I am prepared to die and, better still, to be shot and killed by the forces of law and order instead of my being lynched and killed by these my followers for failing to launch this party" (Gwellem, 1996:8). Therefore, popular support for the initiative appear to be the bedrock on which the courage to launch the party by John Fru Ndi lay. At that very moment, it was not very much the need to bring the incumbent regime down or to relieve Cameroonians from the backdrop of economic hardship. It was more a necessity for him to satisfy the curiosity of the gathering by using courage.

Optimism, another source of the courage to launch the party played in favour of the entire project. Optimism sets the pace for some individuals to fit themselves squarely well in the local and national political framework. In a given situation of risk individuals become courageous to undertake the risk because they are also positive about what they want to do. If John Fru Ndi was pessimistic about the outcome of the action to be taken, then, he would have certainly resorted to another alternative to deal with the issue. At that very moment, if he had surrendered, he would have been certainly viewed as a betrayer. The situation was therefore irreversible. In a nutshell, perceived popular support, optimism and self-confidence with potential for success (efficacy) encouraged John Fru Ndi to launch the SDF.

Describing the situation of the launching day, an eyewitness recounts that on May 26, 1990 at 10:00 am in the residence of John Fru Ndi, young people arrived in great numbers while other people had gathered at Ntarinkon in readiness to join SDF leaders in a procession to City Chemist Roundabout. Judging that time was ripe and ripe enough, reports the informant, John Fru Ndi came out dressed in a pair of shorts and singlet and told the gathering at his residence that the launch shall hold; a message that came following worries whether or not it should be postponed. He also instructed supporters and sympathisers to observe that the launch be peaceful "even if anyone in the rally assaults you, don't retaliate." As he moved out of his residence to Ntarinkon Park, on arrival he was greeted with enthusiasm and admiration. To that effect he was helped to climb to the roof of a Land Rover vehicle on which he pronounced a speech declaring the SDF launched.

However, the number of supporters and sympathisers that gathered around the event is subject of controversy between private and public reporters of the issue. Private reporters talk of about 80,000 people while public media especially the national media reveal some 20,000. The fact is that making the turnout high or low depends on which side one belongs. The stake for the public media to reduce the number is to make the event appear as a non-event; to delegitimize it. The other side may have wanted to increase the number in order to express support for the event and indirectly promote it. In any case, the turnout at the launching was high and no passerby could be indifferent. Some have even compared the crowd to that during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Bamenda in 1985.

From Ntarinkon Park, the crowd marched pass through Small Mankon to Rendez-Vous junction and reached City Chemist Roundabout where it confronted with troops. In the confrontation, the troops fired teargas causing the crowd to pull backward. The teargas was followed by torrents of water from cannons. Meanwhile traffic that had been blocked prevented those from the other side of the town like Abakwa (Old Town), Meta Quarters, Big Mankon and Nkwen from reaching Ntarinkon. In the City Chemist Roundabout confrontation, some probably infuriated individuals shot stones at gendarmes and policemen. In retaliation, the troops opened fire and shot six young people who were reported dead.<sup>v</sup>

An extract of the launching message reads thus "Today we call on you to yell for democracy...the struggle will continue (and) can only stop when all the people participate in their own government" As a challenge to current autocratic regimes, John Fru Ndi accused its leaders of "using the vocabulary of democracy to conceal modern forms of dictatorships". The

pace was set for multiparty democracy. At least, 26 May, 1990 marked the birth of a new political party in the North West and considered by North westerners as such even if it was still to be considered likewise by governmental authorities. The emergence of this party and its leader were going to determine the new register upon which politics will be played out not only in the North West but in the entire country. Perhaps, most significant are the various interpretations given to the birth of this party.

### 3.4. The Political Implications of an Opposition After 1990

The birth of the SDF and the emergence of its leader as popular figure reflect the extent to which the incumbent had come to grip with a new political reality. It signified the birth of a new challenger—an incoming political adversary. The rise of the SDF signified a contestation of the political hegemony of the CPDM not only in the North West region but throughout the national constituency. Governmental elite who supported the ruling CPDM party saw in the birth of the SDF a destabilising factor in their relationship with the ruling government. In fact, the birth of the party introduced and strengthened the notion of political camps in the North West. Among the North westerners, a competition political attitude was born or at least reinforced.

Supporters and sympathisers of the SDF interpreted the birth of the party as a significant move to end President Paul Biya's rule. The SDF was metaphorically interpreted as 'Sangmelima Don Fall' or 'Suffer Don Finish'.<sup>vi</sup> Partisans and sympathisers of the ruling CPDM coined it in the opposite direction to mean 'Suffer Deh Front'.<sup>vii</sup> John Fru Ndi himself as Peterkings Manyong (2008:5) reports was perceived as a long awaited messiah who would redeem the country from the strange hold of a regime that had plunged Cameroon into an economic quagmire. He was visualized as the next president of Cameroon.

Symbolically, Bamenda, the capital city of the North West was seen as the birth place of multiparty democracy. The reason is that it was there that streets and other public places were reinvented for that purpose (Sindjoun, 2004). The City Chemist Roundabout, site of the confrontation between troops and the population was codenamed "Liberty square". In fact, the birth of the SDF broadened the scope of political participation and competition at both the local and national levels. It increased the propensity of people to engage in partisan politics. Locally, the birth of the party signifies the politicisation of local government. It implies the entrenchment of political parties in North West local politics particularly at the level of communes or local councils. It increased the degree of competition among parties and individuals for control over local councils.

John Fru Ndi became the pioneer chairman of the SDF and the party's nominee for presidential elections. He participated as SDF presidential hopeful in the 1992 presidential elections (and subsequent elections) and was defeated by the Paul Biya, candidate of the CPDM. However, he came second and has maintained that position to date. Today, John Fru Ndi is the major opposition leader in Cameroon politics and his party is the main opposition party.

## 4. Conclusion

In transition societies, opposition activists need more than just an environment supportive of democracy to become politically active. They also need political capacities and desired behaviour to be able to raise awareness and mobilise mass appetite and support for democratic reforms. These constructs are rooted in a trajectory of accumulation and redistribution which are significant life cycle resources observed among opposition activists. The emergence of John Fru Ndi, a native of Baba village in the North West Cameroon as major opposition leader and his party, the SDF, as main opposition party after 1990 relatively followed this pattern of political activism. He was able to politically reinvent the main streets of Bamenda by mobilising a crowd around an event to launch the SDF, in the midst of tight security and within a political context that was not friendly to inclusiveness. Following the event, the government was compelled to adopt substantial democratic reforms. Since then, multiparty democracy has been consolidated with the regular organisation of presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections to which many political parties participate. Nevertheless, the political peril of the opposition began when it was unable to win presidential and parliamentary elections, at least officially. The opposition from this perspective and thereafter the success recorded in introducing reforms was reduced to a passive political overseer of the ruling government.

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<sup>i</sup> For another example of the political usages of accumulation and redistribution, see Mouiché, I. 2008. « Multipartisme, « Bigmanisme » politique et démocratisation au Cameroun » *Revue Africaine d'études politiques et stratégiques*. No. 5. Université Yaoundé II. Faculté des sciences juridiques et politiques. 19-46.

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<sup>ii</sup> Verba and Nie (1972:148) find that for overall participation, there is a decline in activity rate for individuals over sixty-six.

<sup>iii</sup> Extract from an article by Sali Sardou Nana available at SDF official website <http://www.sdfparty.org/English/people/78.php>, consulted on July 14, 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> The term floor and ceiling on participation are borrowed from Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) who find that a floor on participation means abundant participatory opportunities and a ceiling simply reflects limited opportunities for potential participants. In our context, a floor is taken to mean actual permissible opposition while a ceiling will mean controlled opposition.

<sup>v</sup> The six people reported to have been killed include Fidelis Chosi Mankam, a corn mill operator in Bamenda; Nfon Edwin Jatob, a 21 years old tailor; Tifuh Mathias Teboh, a 25 years old student; Juliette Sikod, a 17 years form five student at Cameroon Commercial College (CCC) Mankon; Asanji Christopher Fombi, an 18 years old student of Technical High School Bamenda who hails from Konda-Njikwa in Momo Division, and Toje Evaristus Chatum Gwellem, student of Nacho Comprehensive College.

<sup>vi</sup> Sangmelima is the hometown of incumbent President Paul Biya and challenger of John Fru Ndi. Suffer don finish is in pidgin language, a language widely spoken by people of Anglophone background and it means suffering has come to an end.

<sup>vii</sup> Suffer Deh Front is Pidgin English expression that stands for more suffering is ahead. It should be noted that the prefix of word in SDF is what has been coined.