

Elites, National Elections and Ethnic Campaign Financing in Cameroon: the October 2011 Presidential Polls

Rogers OROCK

Department of Culture & Society, Aarhus University, DENMARK

and

Sciences Po, Paris

Abstract

On 9 October 2011 Cameroon held its fourth presidential polls since the transition to multiparty politics in 1990 during which twenty-three candidates from various ethnic communities contended for close to five million votes. The winner of these polls, Paul Biya, Cameroon's octogenarian Head of State, was thus able to prolong his three decade hold on political power, one that he has shrewdly maintained over the years by a combination of ruthless coercion on any dissidents and manipulative ethnic and patronage networks of political and administrative elites within his ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). While attention to the conduct of elections in Africa has often focused on their "unfairness" and "irregularities" in terms of clientelistic vote-buying, ballot rigging, intimidation and other practices of this sort, little is known about the modes of campaigning and campaign financing during such elections. Based on participant observations of the October 2011 presidential elections in Cameroon, this paper provides an ethnographic account of the electoral campaign activities of a specific group of powerful political elites from Manyu Division in South-Western Cameroon. The paper analyzes how these political elites organized, mobilized voters and sought to finance their campaign activities in favor of President Biya by appealing to ethnic fund-raising from their fellow Manyu kinsmen living across the major towns and cities of Cameroon, through ethnic town-hall meetings. These actors and events are situated and analyzed in the context of Cameroon's patrimonialism where the dynamics of political participation and accountability in the country's experience with multiparty politics are mediated by the politics of belonging and expectations of patronage.