



EITD Research

# e-Citizens Bulletin

*Empowering People in Cameroon*

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## MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT Change the Way You Exercise Power

Multiparty parliamentary elections may be holding in Cameroon, come 2007. Political leaders and organisations can be expected to compete for seats. Some will win. Some will lose. Controversially or not, another democratic election would be under the country's belt. But, as the political change or status quo may not be for the better, many could be left wondering, as they do now, what use elections? Their power is dissipated and trivialised in Cameroon.

The 2007 parliamentary elections will be the fourth in a row since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1990. They have produced multiparty parliaments and put various coalitions in government. These have enacted new laws, including a revised Constitution and Standing Orders of the National Assembly. But, paradoxically, several of the laws continue to reflect well known colonial administration attitudes in their apparent dislike of the freedom and competitive dynamism that is inherent in the multiparty political enterprise. The opportunity the people so get to choose at elections is made to appear meaningless.

The consequences have been devastating. As we noted in *L & E Alert Vol. 2 No.5*, 'lax attitudes thus appear to win in Cameroon. In the executive, in the legislature and in the judiciary, few senior officials appear to direct themselves towards performance and contribution.

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Instead, the officials look busy trying to monopolise the allocation of goods and/or services in Cameroon society, and claiming (to use President Biya's words) "exorbitant privileges" in the process. Hard, systematic, work can hardly be said to be a feature of the State of Cameroon today. The economic result? Much continuing inefficiency, impoverishing the vast majority of the population, denying the government much needed fiscal revenue to meet its debt obligations and guarantee Constitutionally mandated individual rights and freedoms.'

To exercise power in this way is to abuse it completely and wastes the political resources of a people, who can then act unpredictably! Members of Parliament, the people of Cameroon have mandated you and the President of the Republic to exercise National Sovereignty. Conserve their political resources and trust in you. Change the way you exercise power, now!

## 1. STANDING ORDERS

Standing Orders contain the internal rules and regulations of the National Assembly. They were drawn up by the National Assembly (Parliament) in accordance with Article 17[2] of the Constitution. Standing Orders are crucial to the way Members of Parliament exercise National Sovereignty. Parliament is required to legislate and control government action (Article 14[2] of the Constitution). National Sovereignty is vested in the people of Cameroon and exercised through the President of the Republic and Members of Parliament or by way of referendum (Article 2[1] of the Constitution).

But, even as the Standing Orders have been evolving, they remain far from easing efforts of Parliament to fully assume its responsibilities in the viable representative multiparty democracy that Cameroon is aspiring to become. So much so, and since everything cannot be put to a referendum, the President of the Republic appears alone battling for the people of Cameroon, with little input from Members of Parliament, and when they contribute, their effort is hardly competitive and often marginalised.

The results have been catastrophic to the wellbeing of the Nation of Cameroon. Poverty is now widespread and rising with bitter feelings of alienation, fragmenting society and agitation for separation in the country. National Unity is jeopardised. The people, seeing their political resources wasted, could act unpredictably! To keep the trust the people have placed in them, Members of Parliament would have to become more responsible in the exercise of National Sovereignty.

They cannot hope to do this without reforming Standing Orders of the National Assembly. Parliament has to become the civic education centre of intense political competition in co-operation that it should be. A model of increasing productivity and

good governance that is open, transparent, accountable, efficient and effective, to be full of positive impacts in government and society. For these to be attained, Members of Parliament would have to ensure that Standing Orders of the National Assembly make it easy for Parliament to obtain and share information, consider policies and bills adequately and decide wisely.

### *Information Flows*

To legislative power, Article 26 of the Constitution reserves many important issues of the people. These include: rights, guarantees and obligations of the citizen; status of persons and property ownership system; political, administrative and judicial organisation; rules governing the issue of currency, the budget, the creation of duties and taxes and the determination of their basis of assessment, rates and methods of collection, land tenure and State lands and mining, and natural resources; programming the objectives of economic and social action; and the system of education.

The obligation requires policymaking at various stages and cycles in government and society and involves a great deal of information, which Members of Parliament need to have to exercise legislative power well. They need to be aware of, track, and provide oversight on, policy – from its formulation through implementation to evaluation – as well as produce and share information in the process, with other branches of government and society. They cannot do these well if it is hard for them to acquire and share information that is relevant, objective, reliable and up-to-date.

Members of Parliament have to ensure that Standing Orders of the National Assembly take their information acquisition and sharing needs much more seriously and reorganise the Permanent Secretariat of Parliament accordingly. Acquisition and sharing of information should be more

active, with Parliament taking the lead in relating with other arms of government and society. Libraries and archival services should be given much more prominence, together with information communication technologies (ICTs). Parliament needs to be setting up investigative Committees readily, and empowering them to work and report, freely.

### *Policy Considerations*

There is little point setting up Committees to consider policy/bills in detail and spend so much time, as the Standing Orders of Parliament do at the moment, wanting to restrict debate of the issues. Parliament needs to reach out more and tap policy resources of society as a whole, not just those of government departments. The role of the Secretary General as convenor of meetings of Committees needs urgent review. More has to be done to clarify the role of Private Members bills and prevent government business crowding them out of consideration. Public petitions should be received and heard much more readily.

Also, the need to re-elect Members of the Permanent Bureau every year helps to make planning short term in Parliament. Even as they are eligible for re-election, Bureau Members surely feel pressurised and less inclined to consider programming legislation and control of government action in the medium and/or long term. Bureau Members oversee parliamentary activities and constitute the majority of the Chairmen's Conference that sets the Agenda of Parliament. Now, Parliament has a five-year mandate, wouldn't it be better to elect the Permanent Bureau into office for that period and make provisions to boot Members out when they do wrong or fail to deliver some election promises?

### *Decision Making*

Standing Orders of the National Assembly allow Members of Parliament to make too

many political decisions anonymously. This is not good, because the politicians fail to pay the political price or reap the political rewards of the political decisions they make in Parliament. On the key issues that come before Parliament, it would be great to record and publish the speeches made or papers presented by, and votes of, each individual Member of Parliament.

## **2. THE HOUSE BUDGET**

Parliament enjoys administrative and financial autonomy. It drafts and passes its own budget, which is included *ipso facto* in the general State Budget, every year. It thus falls to Parliament to become the example in its mission to legislate and control government action. It has to show proof of its own productivity and good governance, by being open, transparent, accountable, efficient, effective and full of positive impacts in its use of scarce public resources. Parliament cannot hope to do this, as it appears at the moment, without a clear medium/long term Agenda of its own, especially as government action is said to be increasingly medium/long term.

The rational base of the House Budget is difficult to discern, if at all. This in part is due to the absence of a clear medium/long term Agenda on which it can be located. Also, the House Budget is supposed to have been drawn up by Questors who are expected to exercise control over House finances and express their opinion only with respect to expenditure commitments within the limits determined by Bureau Orders that are scarcely published. Many issues thus continue to appear unattended, including whether activities of the House can or do generate income, how much, and if they do raise revenue where and how the income is or should be used.

Changes in the House Budget thus appear incremental, based more on administrative accounts of the House than on its political considerations of needs of the country.

### 3. MICRO-PROJECT CREDIT

An important area of parliamentary activity that grabs much public attention is what is often referred to as Micro-Project Credit. Special allocations in the House Budget that Members of Parliament receive to help finance constituency activities. Members of Parliament appear to enjoy great latitude in the use of this money.

However, partly because material needs of many constituencies are indeed very great and urgent, many Members of Parliament use their micro-project funds to finance projects that meet basic needs, but fail to tackle core constituency political problems. They try to construct school classrooms and benches, health centres, culverts, provide exercise books, pencils and rulers to school children, agricultural tools and seedlings to farmers, etc. But, laudable as the efforts appear, they tend to end in controversy as the micro-project funds are hardly enough to reach all those in need.

Unwittingly, therefore, several Members of Parliament sow seeds of dependency in their constituencies, instead of using their micro-project funds to improve the way they exercise the National Sovereignty of the people of Cameroon.

Little information is obtainable in the State planning system on the life of several political constituencies. So much so, it is so easy for various sections of government and society to perpetuate lies and rumours about development activities and get away with it! So many schools, health centres and public taps that do not exist are said to have been built and installed!

Wouldn't it be great to see Members of Parliament invest micro-project funds to build political commitment and capacity in their constituencies? For example, they could so easily increase the scope, quantity and quality of information available to their constituents and engage them more to

get feedback and better participation in the various policy making, implementation and evaluation opportunities.

But few are those Members of Parliament who even take time to seek improvements in their own knowledge and understanding of the legal, policy and institutional frameworks in operation, and develop appropriate tools with constituents to regulate and control government action in the constituency, and nationally.

### 4. INCREASE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Members of Parliament, evaluate your performance in engaging citizens in policy making, and change the way you exercise power, now.

#### **About EITD Research**

Founded in 1992, EITD Research (Research for Enterprise, Industries, Technology and Development) is an independent dynamic research and policy education institution working on development issues related to technology, enterprise and industries.

Our mission is to find out how and assist society to take, with responsibility, opportunities offered by science in the use of technology in development via enterprise and industries. Also, to augment strategy and policy recommendations with field services and technical support in resources management.

We are a private non-profit making non-governmental association that receives support from foundations, governmental and inter-governmental institutions, private corporations and concerned individuals.

The e-Citizens project seeks to encourage civil society to organise and participate more effectively in governance. It is co-sponsored by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA).