Faith in Civil Society
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Re-imagining faith-based and civil society organisations as agents of development in transitional polities in Africa

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Unlike many African countries – such as Nigeria with its civil war in the early 1960s, the Democratic Republic of Congo with its ongoing conflict, and Sudan and Somaliland, just to mention but a few – Cameroon has not suffered from war. However, this does not imply that Cameroon is free from human insecurity – that its population enjoys “safety from chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the patterns of daily lives – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities” (UNDP 1994). The imposed World Bank Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the 1980s posed a serious threat to human and national security. That the country evaded war, with the imposition of SAP coinciding with the country’s return to multiparty politics, was due to the intervention of supreme powers. The churches strongly appealed to their followers to pray, constantly, for peace, unity and serenity to reign in the country, so as to avoid the kinds of situations existing in neighbouring countries and within the Central African sub-region, where Cameroon remains an island of peace in a turbulent setting.

How do faith-based and civil society organisations (FBOs and CSOs) fit into these inter-related activities in Cameroon? The problem of human and national insecurity is regarded as a combination of social, political, and economic factors, and can therefore not be solved by addressing any one in isolation. Through their out-reach activities, FBOs and CSOs address the shortcomings in state delivery of basic needs; the lack of social
services such as healthcare, education, jobs and social security networks are seen as threats to individual and national security. They also educate poor people, who tend to lack awareness of laws and their rights, making structures of public accountability and transparency meaningful to them. A holistic, integrated approach, which combines a sustainable economic community with political and livelihood development policies, has the best chance to succeed, and for this there is need for a harmonious interface between the state, civil society and private sector.

**FBOs, CSOs and the democratisation conundrum in Cameroon:**

**Finding common grounds**

Globalisation, liberalisation, and the withdrawal of external support from Cold War alliances have placed enormous strains on some developing countries, Cameroon being one example. Best described as a “fragile or failed state”, Cameroon is a country with high levels of corruption, poverty and inequality and low levels of state capacity (Forje 2003, 2009, 2010; Mbembe 1992). Cameroon is particularly vulnerable to internal and external shocks, as well as to domestic and international conflicts.

The return to multi-party politics in Cameroon in the early 1990s and the drive towards democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa should be understood and contextualised within the framework of Western hegemonic domination through liberal economics and market domination. It had a double-edged sword effect. The hegemonic centralised ethnic authoritarian regime was challenged by the forces of the people (Forje 2009). As Robert Mbe Akoko asserts (2007, p 186): “twin developments – the reconfiguring of global capitalism and the poor performance of African economies – would leave indelible imprints on many aspects of Cameroon’s national political and social life, aspects such as the emergence of hegemonic forces, the intensification of ethnic group politics, the growth of secessionist and irredentist movements, and regionalism” (see also Nyamnjoh 1999, 2002; Mbuagbo 2002).

Developments in Cameroon since the 1990s vindicate state victory over the people’s will, and, therefore, the current crisis of governance exposes and widens the gap between the governors and governed. Like orphans, the people turn to the churches for basic needs as well as spirit-
Reviewing international experience and lessons from Kosovo, individual salvation, hoping that invincible forces will bring some sense to bear on the regime. State-Church relations in Cameroon are largely a function of opposing understandings and interpretations of the meaning of democracy. The nexus of good governance – transparent, impartial, accountable and redistributive functions of the state – and issues of civil liberties have become central in the churches’ concern to ensure that all Cameroonian political stake-holders adhere to agreed-upon democratic principles (Akoko 2007).

This serves to remind us of why one should not ghettoise religious civil society groups, giving them ‘minimal’ educational roles. Some of the deepest intellectual critiques of how the world is being governed – its trading systems, inequalities, and so on – have actually come from within faith-based institutions (Naidoo 2010). In Cameroon, Cardinal Tumi Christian (2012) stands out significantly as a critic of the failure of government and a defender of the rights of the people. Seen from this perspective, religious organisations are performing civic humanistic functions. In addition, the process of modernisation and the growing influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have actually facilitated the growth of religion in many respects, as religions have taken advantage of the networking possibilities to organise on a global scale and to reach out to a wider audience. Religion is set to play a definitive role in contemporary society, if it is given the opportunity to adapt to the plurality and the progressive demands of the global challenges we face.

**Developing the capacity to deliver**

Faith-based and civil society organisations in Cameroon have been champions when it comes to defending the civil liberties of the people. This brought them into sharp confrontation with the state, and for once the churches were united around a common goal: to ensure a genuine democratisation and good governance process in the country. But on October 9, 2011, the presidential elections injected division within the united stance that the mainstream churches had taken so far on issues of good governance, corruption and poverty in Cameroon (The Horizon 2011; Asonganyi 2011; Lado 2011; Nyansako 2011). The situation displayed
an operational impasse within civil society that must be overcome, if the full potential of civil society is to be realised. The path towards resolving these challenges is mapped out against the backdrop of significant historical experiences of secular and religious communities, working together to advance justice. FBOs and CSOs are asked to engage in a respectful manner in their out-reach activities to society, and to use their influence and power for the good of society and humanity. Steps are taken by some clergy to find common grounds in issues concerning real-life needs of people, and groups work jointly to confront the numerous challenges facing humanity today.

Given the enormity of these challenges, it is imperative for secular and religious civil society to engage effectively, build relationships and find common ground, thereby creating the necessary capacity to address peoples’ basic challenges and deliver services effectively.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The mainstream churches, in their capacity as faith-based organisations, have – in collaboration with other civil society organisations – helped create political and social awareness in the country. The emerging churches have also in different ways contributed to this process of change which has been designed to improve the wellbeing of the people. By creating awareness among the people, changing their lifestyle, and by providing basic needs to the vulnerable, they have qualified as social movements for constructive engagement and change. They also shepherd people towards spiritual uprightness, which helps in bringing moral and ethical rectitude as well as in laying the foundation for peace and stability.

Peace and stability are sustained on the shoulders of people and communities alone, not by state political actors. Seen within that context, FBOs and CSOs must work towards reconciliation, and rebuild themselves to ensure the development of society. Creating political institutions and ensuring their functionality is vital. These groups should move beyond their mission of evangelisation, in order to build a sustained society through reconciliation, consensus, dialogue and people-oriented focused development. The main challenge facing these two categories of civil society and the state is the issue of good leadership, required to foster
the good ideals of FBOs and CSOs. The challenge is even greater because of existing fragmentation of identities, and because of the mismatch between present-day challenges and exigencies and the ability or inability of existing institutions to address them promptly and objectively to the best satisfaction of the communities.

References


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