The Vicissitudes of the Cameroon Civil Society in the 1990s: What lessons for the Central African Region?, Awasom Yene Susanne

The 1990s will go down in recorded history as one of the tumultuous eras in contemporary history, comparable in several respects to the violent decolonisation struggles of the 1950s. In response to the global and domestic environment, the Cameroon civil society was galvanised and electrified into action to conquer and expand the democratic space and ensure a peaceful and lasting requiem for monopartyism. When one poses to take stock of this eventful decade, one may question what was actually achieved in concrete and visible terms.

This author critically traces the itinerary of the Cameroon civil society in its quest for political pluralism and change in the 1990s. She argues that a vibrant civil society in Cameroon incarnated by students, octogenarian female groups, churches, NGOs, lawyers, traders etc emerged in the early 1990s to clamour for multipartyism and a new political order. But it waned and lost its vitality in the second half of the 1990s as the government seized the initiative and bounced back in a full one-party political posture. She seeks to critically explain and analyse the vicissitudes of the civil society. She concludes by advocating a rehabilitation and reactivation of the moribund Cameroon civil society as an insurance for checks and balances and good governance through painstaking political education and support by national and international stakeholders.

This paper is divided into four parts. First, it looks at the domestic and global circumstances that reactivated and energised the Cameroon civil society. The author then proceeds to examine the politics of confrontation that took shape in the organisation of Ghost Towns and Civil Disobedient Campaigns and the outcome of such strategies. Thirdly, she surveys the organisation of multiparty elections against a background of a vibrant civil society in the first half of the 1990s. Lastly, she explains the waning and eclipsing of the civil society, and the enveloping of the political landscape by an all-pervasive attitude of political apathy and disaffection. The conclusion will contain useful lessons for Cameroon and the Central African zone.

This paper is constructed from newspaper reports, interviews and secondary sources.