

ECAS 2019 Africa: Connections and Disruptions.

Pol23: Emergenc(i)es : Disruptive events and their consequences in African politics

Edinburgh, the United Kingdom, 11-14 June 2019.

« Politics of suspicion as a disruptive form of language and the practice of the State in Africa:
the case of Cameroon »

BELINGA ONDOUA PATRICK DIEUDONNE

Ecole de Gouvernance et d'Economie (EGE) de Rabat & the University of Turin

THE OBJECTIVES AND THE OUTLINE OF THE COMMUNICATION

In this communication, the aim is to show that the hegemonic bloc of power in Cameroon feeds on an economy of suspicion instilled in bottom-up actors as an immediate response to the sociopolitical and economic crisis that the country is facing. Another objective is to articulate how modes of political subjectivation, in other words “ways of life”, are structured around a suspicion regime. I would also like to show that suspicion can be object of political study in contemporary Africa that enables us to gain a deeper understanding of ongoing crisis dynamics.

This communication comprises three main axes: first, an introduction that briefly sets out the context, the research question and the field research, followed by a part focused on the results of the research during which we will see how politics of suspicion are a perfectly disruptive mode of government and political subjectivation in Cameroon today; and finally, a part devoted to the generalization of the results in order to grasp what suspicion means and what it can say about politics in Africa amidst its crisis.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The current sociopolitical and economic situation in Cameroon reflects a general context marked by an ongoing crisis. Political crises, either in the shape of the “Anglophone crisis” or the expansion of Boko Haram, have taken over social and economic crises, thus absorbing the biggest share of public spending from a security point of view. In this way, resources are particularly limited to tackle the unprecedented economic crisis which the country has been facing since 2016, ten years after officially emerging from the prolonged crisis (1990-2006). This explains that Cameroon is falling deeper into a credit-based economy, more pronounced than in previous decades. The indebtedness of Cameroon mainly happened in the form of co-financing which generally requires the country itself to gather funding. Indeed, it is the

ability of the State to mobilize these funds serving as co-financing that is indicative of the economic situation of the country: the difficulty that the State faces to bring its share of co-financing is recurrent in Cameroon.

Problem statement

There is no doubt that this situation of crisis and scarcity must be examined in the context of the transformations of government modes and the political subjectivation that it induces. Beyond these issues, a further consideration is that the “hegemonic bloc of power” (Bayart, 1989) is maintained without questioning order within society. Therefore, the question is how hegemonic struggles, which do not challenge the existing order, take place across society in Cameroon.

This financial incapacity, in my view, raises two major difficulties for the State. The first difficulty lies in the linkage between the legitimacy of the regime and the exhaustion of the budget. As the State can no longer effectively count on its stocks to carry out strategic operations of legitimation by patronage and by resorting to large-scale violence, as was the case decades ago (Eboussi Boulaga, 1997), it has to devise other legitimation mechanisms. The second major difficulty for the State lies in the linkage between credit-based economy and sovereignty. Since indebtedness has become a recurrent modality of statecraft, the question arises of how the State reconciles both conditionalities related to loans granted by States or international organizations, and the equally pressing need to meet demands of the population, and at the same time to “save face” (Goffman, 1974).

The experience of the Participatory Slum Upgrading Program (PSUP)

These general and fundamental questions have been at the heart of my inquiries on the basis of a practical experience which I attempted to analyze in detail: the implementation of the Participatory Slum Upgrading Program (PSUP) in Yaoundé.

This program was guided by two broad objectives: encouraging urban participation and generalizing access to land and property for populations in slums in the cities of Yaoundé, Kribi and Bamenda. Unlike many urban development programs, the PSUP did not plan the eviction of the populations, but only the rehabilitation of target areas. This implied the reconciliation of two different objectives: maintaining the acquired properties and land of the local populations while modernizing them. This so-called “modernization” was to be marked by infrastructures and urban equipment built by local associations; through land regularization; by putting in place a joint ownership system (between the indigenous and non-indigenous population, between land and real estate owners) who were entrusted with credit institutions and real estate companies; through some necessary demolitions to coordinate the acquired properties with the development plans of the cities. However, none of this happened: there were no multi-storey buildings; no land regularization, no joint ownership, no rehabilitated main and secondary roads and no redevelopment of the so-called green zone (the

wetland area), except for the construction of some culverts and gutters which fell apart later. I conducted an ethnographic research in 2017, in order to understand better what happened. The research undertaken concerned high level officials, the local populations and seven local associations involved in the PSUP, selected in the five districts of the city of Yaoundé (the area of Nkolbikok).

RESULTS

Suspicion as a disruptive mode of government

One of the results of my research is that ordinary suspicion, analyzed as parts of the language, along with actual practices, is not mundane at all since it underlies specific processes of a search for hegemony. My hypothesis is that widespread suspicion explains why the State in Cameroon, although in crisis, does not disintegrate, why we are not witnessing generalized physical violence and in particular, the reason behind the status quo in terms of development. My demonstration takes place at two levels.

The first level of analysis lies in what I call the phenomenon of “governing by suspicion”. The dynamics observed through the PSUP show that despite insufficient funding for urban policies and for the program itself (we only had 500 million XFA francs against the estimated need of 14 billions), State officials ended up “saving their face”, as Ervin Goffman would say, through two processes: first, through dramatization, and precisely in the staging of the distribution of 500 million XFA as a donation from the State. This dramatization contributed to strengthening State legitimacy, while subjecting the associative actors in charge of managing these programs on poor funding to the critical scrutiny of the local populations, what the neighborhood residents call “the radar”. Because lack of financing hindered from respecting the requirements contained in the specifications, and because the dramatization generated greed among local populations, associative actors have been accused of all ills, such as embezzlement, selfishness, egotism, etc. even if the grievances against them were often unproven and the money staged by the State was insignificant, and even worse, it was a loan by the European Union that did not exist at the moment of its “distribution”. This is what I pointed to as “**bottom-up suspicion**”.

The second process is related to the “discharge” mechanism, explained by Béatrice Hibou (1999). The PSUP stakeholders relieved themselves from responsibility by putting an NGO in charge as a semi-state actor. This NGO, called ERA-Cameroon, in the name of the State, facilitated some forms of surveillance and control over local associations, which induced modes of subjugation in two ways: pedagogical devices and domination through culturalism. In reality, State officials have put in place a number of « formalities » such as reunions, the requirement to produce reports, etc., which allowed them to exercise control over the associative actors with the justification of these actors’ ignorance of modern urban development tools. Similarly, there was a form of domination by the invocation of culture, that is, a domination that involves assumptions on the tendency of the actors and the populations to “eat” and worse, “eat without distributing”. This was indicated by the

expressions “We know Cameroonians” and “Between the Cameroonians, we know each other”. This is what I pointed to as “**top-down suspicion**”.

These two phenomena emerge from the “as if” policy (Hibou, 2006): it is by acting “as if” State power still had resources that the PSUP stakeholders have fostered the adverse effects of the control exercised by the local populations; it is by acting “as if” the success of the PSUP only depended on the “good” management of funds that state or semi state agencies managed to implement techniques facilitating the subjection of associative actors.

In short, I tried to show that the government by the means of suspicion enabled the State to redeploy itself in this difficult context of urban policies in Cameroon, and as a side effect the status quo related to the living conditions of the local populations remained.

The second level of analysis to which I resorted relates to **the process of political subjectivation marked by suspicion**. This process was observed in two stages, but here, I am only using the unsuccessful case of co-ownership. In fact, the analysis of co-ownership helped highlight a facet of “ethnicist” rhetoric and in particular, a facet of the anti *Bamiléké* discourse (and practices). The PSUP envisioned that real estate and financial companies construct buildings in partnership with the PSUP public officials to resell them or rent them to the same residents, at market price. To this end, the local populations (indigenous and non-indigenous) had to make the repurchase of their regularized lands to these financial companies easier by accepting the sale of these lands at a ridiculously low price. This provision was refused by majority, as it was considered as a plot by the *Bamiléké*, who have been suspected since the 50s, in the collective political imagination, of wanting to seize the country and to dominate politically and economically the other ethnic groups. Indeed, there were many “signs”, and all the public or private stakeholders of the PSUP were assimilated to the *Bamiléké*. Therefore, they were “logically” accused of having predatory intentions. Yet, none of these allegations could be proven.

In short, I showed how the suspicious process of subjectivation contributed to block progress on the PSUP and even the effective realization of the program in Nkolbikok.

GENERALIZATION ATTEMPT

What the politics of suspicion mean:

Based on the results of my research, I can define politics of suspicion as a complex system of conspiracy interpretations which are difficult to verify and which “engage” social and political structures. The politics of suspicion seek to unveil how « vulgar marxism » (Boltanski, 2012) works as well as its linkages with power relationships and with the processes of the search for hegemony. Therefore, it does not have anything particularly culturalist nor essentialist. We can gain a better understanding of “the politics of suspicions” by subdividing it into three axes.

The first axis touches on power arrangements. Given its diminished resources and the necessity to save face, the institutional power cannot consider other means of maintaining itself but the deployment of “soft” and “insidious” domination mechanisms which operate as a benevolent and arbitrary radar, resting on the official proclamation of international main principles for which the hegemonic bloc in power marks its “commitment”. It is the case of the fight against corruption via Operation Epervier, launched in February 2006 by the president of the President of Cameroon. Beyond professed intentions, the fight against corruption could become a specific form of governing, hinged with strategies of domination and power, or at least strategies of purification and control over social and political elites, without the use of violence.

The second axis of the politics of suspicion concerns the involvement of society. The scarcity of resources might explain that the populations are more and more worried about their social positioning and develop feelings of mistrust and suspicion among themselves and in their relationships with the State in the context of policies and so-called ambitious projects. This mode of working on oneself through suspicion, as assumptions and presuppositions remain as such, eliminates the likelihood of using violence between the populations, as well as the use of violent dissenting practices. Generalized suspicion would lead simply the people to be on guard and to prefer the status quo. This applies particularly to land disputes between indigenous and non-indigenous people, as reflected in the opposition logics witnessed in my research on the PSUP.

The third axis is about arguments supporting suspicion. This suspicious governmentality cannot be effective without tactical and strategic operations of objectification or phantasmagoric justification, marked by prejudices, conspiracy interpretations and rumors, which are legitimate conditions for the implementation of specific strategies of domination. In other words, these realizations founded on rumors become part of a form of power and countervailing power and greatly influence the implementation of political processes. For instance, “the force of prejudice” (Taguieff, 1988) can be clearly seen in inter-ethnic conflicts, the discourse on witchcraft and the current partisan fights in Cameroon.

What politics of suspicion can say:

The politics of suspicion are more than the expression of irrational fantasies. The formulation of the politics of suspicion is by no means opposed to a reasoning exercise and to a composition attempt with logics of investigation and “evidence”, which are considered as such by the actors themselves. However, this evidence is, in reality, nothing more than a number of hints or signs or, even better; it is a constantly-tested evidence. The suspicion lies solely in this “language game” of tested evidence. Therefore, the challenge for the researcher is not to accept at face value the phantasmagoric discourse held by actors who are “involved” in these suspicious political relationships, while taking the same discourse very seriously because these actors often bring it up very seriously.

The formulation of suspicion is not only fanciful. My research can bring to light the political meanings of suspicion practices, thus it shows that it is not a trivial phenomenon without social effects, as one might think. On the contrary, suspicion structures and conditions a number of political and economic processes of socialization in Africa, a continent of “events”. More than that, it is part of a specific political economy of the “steady state” now in Cameroon (*Politique africaine*, 2018/2, n°150).