

What “Wanting to See One’s Children Grow Up” Means for Youth Engaged in Cameroon’s Authoritarian Political Field

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Abstract

Drawing on the now-famous phrase by artist Longué Longué, “I want to see my children grow up”, this article examines the conditioning logics of actors involved in Cameroon’s political arena, with the aim of shedding light on the mechanisms of perceived risk associated with political engagement. It analyzes how these dispositions reflect an internalization of the threats associated with partisan engagement, revealing a habitus shaped by a culture of fear, where the cost of participation becomes a structuring factor in the trajectories of mobilization or demobilization, particularly among young people. Understanding the substance of this position in relation to political competition provides an important entry point for continuing the debate on what it means for young people to be part of the opposition. By analyzing these complex realities through the lens of the social construction of the political field, the article seeks to offer an in-depth perspective on the political socialization of youth in Cameroon. Methodologically, the article is grounded in documentary research and digital archival work on major events likely to shed light on the political repression of opponents, as well as media testimonies. It also draws on interviews conducted between March and May 2024 with young political opponents.

Keywords

Youth, political repression, political field, political socialization, political opposition, Cameroon

Introduction

In the Cameroonian political field, the phrases such as “What can we do?” and, later, “I want to see my children grow up”, has become part of everyday popular language in the public sphere. Understanding this latter expression, made famous on April 28, 2019, by activist musician Longué Longué, who publicly apologized before a global audience and confessed submission to political power, has reinforced interest in this phrase, which reflects a political stance already widespread in the popular imagination and now generalized in the discourse of political actors. The phrase “I want to see my children grow up” here symbolizes hesitation, even fear, among those who, while acknowledging that the situation is unjust, nevertheless choose not to engage concretely in political¹ life. Like the previous expression “What can we do?”, it conveys a sense of powerlessness and fear in those who employ it. Whereas Calixthe Beyala interprets it as a form of cowardice, selfishness, and self-centeredness², Valère Bessala³ sees it simply as a refusal to oppose the ruling regime and a resignation to participate in the political game. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze how the traumatic experiences of politically engaged actors influence the political socialization of young people in Cameroon’s authoritarian context.

Indeed, the phrase “to see one’s children grow up” is rooted in the legacy of authoritarian tendencies and political violence (Enoh Meyomesse, 2016), as well as the use of repression against activists since colonial times. These tendencies, already visible during the construction of the Cameroonian state and nationalist independence struggles, have left a deep mark on collective memory. The assassination on September 13, 1958, of Ruben Um Nyobè, under brutal repression in the forests of Sanaga-Maritime⁴, turned him and his political works into objects of “immense popular admiration” (Deltombe, 2008). He became a symbol simply because he denounced the fate of the indigenous population, along with the corruption and baseness of those who chose to side with political adversaries rather than join the struggle for national sovereignty and social justice. More recently, the case of Martinez Zogo, a committed journalist kidnapped on January 17, 2023, and found dead on January 22 of the same year, constitutes in popular memory a striking example of political reprisals for speaking out and denouncing too much. These events are not isolated. As with many other instances of violence in the political field; they illustrate the use of force as a structural lever of political order. This power play determines young people’s reluctance to become politically active. Felix Nyeck, a member of the political bureau of the Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation (PCRN), corroborates this hypothesis when he states that:

It is true that we do not have exact figures, but I can assure you that the number of our members dropped considerably after the 2018 elections. At first, the youth did not know what difficulties awaited them. As soon as they were intimidated, they deserted the party ranks⁵.

The literature on the relationship to politics in the Cameroonian context, described as “post-authoritarian” (Pommerolle, 2008), “post-monopolistic” (Owona Nguini, 2004; Owona Nguini & Menthong, 2018), “post-monolithic” (Zélao, 2005), or “authoritarian” (Mbembe, 2000), highlights the oscillation between inclusion and exclusion, mistrust and defiance in the political arena. This

1 Interview with Kamche Wappi Célin, Doctor of Political Science, young activist with the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC) “from its very inception,” Deputy Secretary General for Youth, April 30, 2024, in Baganté.

2 https://web.facebook.com/100087601764175/posts/je-veux-voir-mes-enfants-grandir-ou-du-nombrilisme-super-mis%25C3%25A9rable-%25C3%25A0-la-cameroun/165784486351609/?_rdc=1&_rdr, consulted June 13, 2024

3 Valère Bessala is the “Guide” of the Jouvence party.

4 Robert Um Nyobe was a Cameroonian politician and a major figure in the independence movement in Cameroon. Born on September 13, 1913, in Sangmélina, in southern Cameroon, Robert Um Nyobe is considered the founder and leader of the Cameroonian nationalist movement, the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC). In 1948, he co-founded the UPC, a political party that sought to fight for Cameroon’s independence and promote the rights and interests of Cameroonians. The UPC, led by Um Nyobe, adopted nonviolent methods of struggle in its early years, organizing demonstrations, strikes, and awareness campaigns to mobilize the Cameroonian population against French colonialism. However, brutal repression by the colonial authorities led to a gradual radicalization of the movement. His nationalist rhetoric and efforts to unite the different ethnic groups and regions of Cameroon made him a charismatic and respected figure. On September 13, 1958, Robert Um Nyobe was killed during a military operation carried out by the French army. His death was a blow to the Cameroonian independence movement, but his legacy as a visionary leader and defender of the rights of the Cameroonian people lives on.

5 Interview with Félix Nyeck, member of the political bureau of the Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation (PCRN), Soa, May 1, 2024.

context is often described as an environment in which “(...) politics today makes the murder of one’s enemy its primary and absolute goal, under the guise of war, resistance, or the fight against terror” (Mbembe, 2006, p. 26). The liberalization of the political arena, hoped for in the aftermath of the 1990 Tripartite Conference, unfortunately did not take place. Instead, we have witnessed the rise of “passive” (Zelao, 1998; 2003) and “authoritarian” (Kamto, 1993) democratization that is not conducive to free political action. Repeated violations of rights and freedoms, several assassinations that cast suspicion on the ruling order, arbitrary arrests and detentions (Amnesty International, 2023-2024), as well as unemployment, embezzlement scandals, and inflation, have thus led to “a tense relationship with the authorities” (Pommerolle, 2008, p. 74). The identification or framing of the opponent as an “enemy” (Mbembe, 2016) or a “human waste” (Mbembe, 2020) serves to justify the many forms of violence inflicted upon them. Taking this reality into account, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (2014, p. 15) already recognized that the term “opponent” carries a heavy pejorative charge and even suggested that “it is hardly intelligible to proclaim oneself an ‘opponent’ when, opposite you, there is no “proponent”.

According to Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle (2008, p. 74), the ongoing standing repression of those who dared to invest boldly in political opposition has diminished the militant aspirations of successive generations. The desire to “perpetuate oneself” makes intimidation, censorship, repression (Ela, 1990), and “assimilation” (Bayart, 1979) the preferred tools for managing political otherness in the current order. The latter “tends to exist by dispossessing people of themselves; it finds its nature and consistency in the void it creates around itself” (Ela, 1990, p. 58). Speaking out or engaging in politics with a critical view of what the existing political order exposes subjects to complex realities, especially when they refuse compromise (Sindjoun, 2003), in a context where constitutional law does not confer any status on the figure of the political opponent (Guimdo Dongmo, 2014). The lies of the elites, their “moribund promises” (Talla, 2014, p. 29), and electoral fraud (Eboussi Boulaga, 1998, p. 41) all contribute to disenchantment with politics in Cameroon. The state has inherited from the colonial order its ways of administering violence and repression. Thus, socialization into political violence and mistrust of institutions are deeply rooted in colonial history and the post-independence political dynamics marked by the rise of nationalist movements (Deltombe et al., 2011; Mbembe, 1996). This legacy has shaped political institutions, elite behavior, and the interactions between the state and citizens in general, and youth in particular. The political violence observed in Cameroon’s political field today is one of the pillars upon which the postcolonial Cameroonian state was built.

However, the literature on young people’s relationship to politics largely contrasts youth with the perpetuation of authoritarian governance. (Owona Nguini & Menthong, 2018). The one that highlights the authoritarian continuity (Kojoué, 2020), that reinforces them through policies dedicated to youth, their social exclusion, and their precariousness (Amougou, 2016) as an unshakeable condition⁶. The crisis of public governance and public policy has led to disaffection among young people toward institutions and political elites (FES, 2014). This disaffection has a direct impact on their perception of politics (Eboussi Boulaga, 2011; Loumou Mondoléba, 2020), for which the majority now expressing disinterest. The study conducted by Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (2011) on young people’s perceptions and attitudes toward politics, as well as their dynamics of political engagement and disengagement, reveals that although youth constitute the majority of Cameroon’s population (65%), they paradoxically represent a political minority.

Perceived as the future rather than the present, young people are judged as not yet possessing “the qualities of maturity” (De Bonneval, 2011, p. 18) and therefore lacking the skills necessary to speak about politics or engage in it. From a disparaging standpoint, the older generation frequently associates youth with irresponsibility, frivolity, madness, etc. (De Bonneval, 2011, p. 18). According to De Boeck and Honwana (2000), young people in Africa are often seen as being on the margins of

⁶ These lyrics, taken from one of the songs by the famous Cameroonian rapper and activist, General Valsero, illustrate this point: «This country is killing its young people! The old guard won’t let go. Fifty years in power, and they still won’t let go. The country is corrupting. Young people are slowly dying, while the old, behind their fortresses, get drunk on firewater.» Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-nUfznDIiKA>

society, both economically and politically. In reality, they embody multiple facets. Depending on the circumstances, young people are perceived sometimes as targets and victims, sometimes as fighters, activists, entrepreneurs, or rebels, outlaws, and criminals. Their position and role in society are therefore complex and ambivalent.

On closer inspection, the literature on young people's relationship to politics focuses more on their political participation and representation than on their political socialization. This study seeks, modestly, to fill this gap. Its central problem is built around a central issue: how does the desire to "see one's children grow up" shape the political engagement of young people in authoritarian Cameroon? This question makes it possible to explore several other aspects, particularly the realities concealed by this phrase. It highlights the emotional and moral dilemmas these individuals face, notably their responsibility toward their families and their desire to fight for justice and democracy.

In addition to documentary research and the collection of digital archives on major events shedding light on the political repression of opponents and media testimonies, this study relies on semi-structured interviews conducted with young activists from opposition parties (PCRN, SDF, MRC) concerning the everyday nature of their political engagement. Priority was given to sharing experiences within their political movements and the collection of their accounts of political reality. An analysis of these narratives provides a valuable source for understanding political dynamics and the risks associated with political engagement in a repressive context.

By analyzing these complex realities through the lens of the social construction of the political field, the article seeks to offer an in-depth perspective on the political socialization of youth in Cameroon. The theory of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) offers an important theoretical foundation, as it reminds us that the positioning of young people in their interaction with politics is itself a social construction. Dispositions linked to risk and to the fear of political engagement are therefore internalized as social norms, shaping their relationship to the political order as subordinate actors.

Repressive Logics and the Political Socialization to fear

Repressive logics refer to the different methods used by the ruling order to suppress dynamics of resistance or political subversion. More precisely, repression is understood, in the sense of McAdam, et al. (2001), as the set of "efforts to suppress any act of protest or any group or organization responsible for them" (p. 69). In the Cameroonian context, this includes the use of police violence, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, censorship, surveillance, economic repression, and even death, along with other measures aimed at deterring, controlling, or eliminating individuals or movements perceived as a threat to the established order (DIDR-OFPPRA, 2022). Political violence is understood here as a resource of power involving the threat or effective use of physical coercion (Braud, 2002). As a resource, it can be mobilized either in the context of protest or for the maintenance of power. Repressive practices are also characterized by restrictions on civil and political liberties⁷ as well as constant violations of civic rights. In Cameroon, the socialization of young people to violence and to fear of the political field finds its roots in history and is transmitted within the social fabric through identifiable historical events. From the colonial period to the fight for independence, and through contemporary political conflicts and security challenges, Cameroon has been the stage for violence and fear that have shaped the perceptions and behaviors of youth.

Inherited Fears, Transmitted Fears

Several major historical moments have instilled, at different times, in young Cameroonians, the fear of denouncing, protesting, and demonstrating. The literature on student movements in Cameroon (see Fokwang, 2009; Konings, 2005, 2009; Mokam, 2012; Morillas, 2009, 2010, 2018; Pommerolle, 2007) shows that in the past, youth mobilized repeatedly for social and political causes. Chronologically, the first youth mobilizations date back to 1963, when a student strike was organized at the Federal

⁷ In concrete terms, this translates into restrictions on freedoms (freedom of expression, freedom to protest, freedom of association), as well as strict controls on the media and political activities.

University of Cameroon. Students, grouped under an association called the National Federation of Students of Cameroon (FENEC), demanded scholarships and better academic supervision (Mbia, 2011). In 1969, another student strike was organized and was met with “rapid and effective” repression. Striking students were sent back to their villages (Bayart, 1970, p. 701). Between 1979 and 1981, several student strikes highlighted economic and social grievances rather than political ones. Students at the University of Yaoundé demanded that scholarships be granted to all students and increased at the same rate as salaries. They also demanded better quality of meals in university restaurants, state coverage of rents for students living in university mini-cities, as well as reduced rents in university residences. Despite the purely corporatist nature of their demands, these strikes were violently repressed by the security forces (Morillas, 2018).

On December 18, 1986, another major student mobilization took place both within and outside the university. More than 300 students were arrested (Amnesty International, 1987). Among them, some student leaders were expelled from the university. In May 1991, the Student Parliament, also known simply as the “Parliament,” became associated with the National Coordination of Political Parties and Associations. This coalition launched the “dead cities” operation in several towns across the country in April 1991. The political repression faced by demonstrators led them to rethink their modes of action. In this context, the strategy of “dead cities” emerged as a way to defuse police violence and minimize physical risks.

The “Parliament,” led by three students from the University of Yaoundé, Corantin Talla, nicknamed General Schwarzkopf, Waffo Wanto Robert, alias Colin Powell, and Yimga Yotchou Blaise, alias Abou Nidal, organized a protest against the deterioration of study conditions caused by the economic crisis and structural adjustment measures, as well as against the cancellation of student elections (Morillas, 2018). The Parliament organized demonstrations and boycotted classes to demand genuine multipartyism and to oppose the 1993 university reform, which abolished scholarships and raised tuition fees. The movement resurfaced between April and June 1996 to protest against tuition fees and additional charges. Estimates suggest that around one hundred students died during these strikes (Eteki-Otabela, 2001, p. 375), although the then-Minister of Communication, Augustin Kontchou Kouomegni, claimed there were “zero deaths”.

Students involved, directly or indirectly, in the various strikes were accused of offenses such as disobedience toward university authorities and participation —direct or indirect—in subversive activities. The penalties provided for in the legislation in force, both under the single-party regime and under multiparty regime, were similar. They included warnings, reprimands, bans on sitting exams, temporary exclusions for one or two years, or even permanent exclusion from national universities. Many young people today lived through these horrific times, marked by public assassinations, and some lost their parents. Most of them emerged from this experience traumatized (Ouambo Ouambo, 2020).

Three other episodes contributed to instilling in young Cameroonians the fear of political engagement. First, the 2008 “hunger riots”, during which many young people lost their lives, some drowned in the Wouri River, others shot dead. Labeled as “apprentice sorcerers” by President Paul Biya, the repression of demonstrators was unrestrained. More than 1,500 youths were arrested and imprisoned for vandalism, theft, and disturbing public order (Sourna Loumtouang, 2015). Secondly, the post-electoral crisis of 2018 was characterized by severe repression of pro-MRC demonstrators who took part in the “white marches” organized by the party. Several activists were injured during these marches (Jeune Afrique, 2019). More than a hundred demonstrators were arrested and “arbitrarily detained, simply for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly” (Amnesty International, 2019). The charges leading to their detention ranged from “insurrection”, “rebellion”, and “complicity in secession,” to “compromising state security” (Amnesty International, 2019).

Thirdly, the assassination of journalist Martinez Zogo, who had just denounced corruption and profiteering on December 22, 2022, shocked the nation. On his show “Embouteillage”, Martinez Zogo regularly denounced acts of corruption and social ills. He was abducted on January 17 in the suburbs of the capital, in front of a gendarmerie post, and was found dead five days later. His body was in a

state of decomposition and bore signs of torture. The announcement of his death provoked national and international outrage, denouncing a clear sign of the regime's decay (Le Monde, 2023). "It is the reign of terror. It feels like if a journalist speaks, he will die", declared Prince Nguimbous (Le Monde, 2023). What later became known as "the Martinez Zogo affair" reinforced representations of political power as a "hungry snake," (Alexandre, 2021), a "Moulinex ready to grind the condiments⁸," or a "swarm of bees" (Atanga Nji, 2021).

Indeed, this representation, echoing the discourse of the Minister of Territorial Administration, sheds light on the nature of the State's relationship to all opposing dynamics, considered subversive and identified here as "egg sellers" (Alexandre, 2025). Politics is therefore seen as the business of corrupt men, mafia-like figures who have "dabbled⁹" in "bad things¹⁰". For young people who witness these realities, repression and restrictions on freedom of expression normalize fear and limit the possibility of expressing dissenting opinions. Moreover, they fear the social consequences of their political engagement, since it is often disapproved of, suppressed, and isolated by families. Politics is generally perceived as dangerous. The stigma attached to joining the opposition does not stop at the individual; it also extends to their family and community.

Faced with this generalized fear, which characterizes the majority of young people¹¹, Mebene, a young MRC activist, asks: "Can we really say that our children will grow up well in this environment where corruption, nepotism, and arbitrariness reign? Will they grow up well if they risk being assaulted and dying needlessly in hospital for lack of 5,000 FCFA?" For him, the answer cannot be yes. Youth political engagement and their determination in the face of such challenges are essential conditions if they are to hope to see their children grow up tomorrow.

The Perception of Young People's Political Engagement by Their Families

The emotional and moral dilemmas faced by politically active youth often begin within the family¹². Indeed, when young people become involved in politics, their family members are the first to remind them, hoping to dissuade them, of the dangers of the Cameroonian political field. A young person's political engagement also places their entourage (friends, family) at risk. As a result, they often express their disapproval of their children's political involvement, out of concern for protecting them and themselves. Family members may be subjected to social judgment and disapproving looks from employers and communities¹³. Corinne Atima, a graduate of the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC) and a young MRC activist, recounts:

At first, my commitment was perceived as a huge risk I was taking. It was not, in any case, the thing to do. Everyone around me was afraid... afraid that I would be threatened, assaulted, imprisoned, or, in the worst case, killed. Especially since, even mystically, in our political universe, deaths are legion in my locality [Yokadouma]¹⁴.

On the other hand, another difficulty young people are frequently confronted with when joining the opposition is the ideological divide between them and family members who are "traditional supporters" of the ruling party. These ideological rifts and divergent perceptions of politics create

8 The Minister of Territorial Administration, Paul Atanga Nji, described certain motorcycle taxi drivers, held responsible for assaults, rapes, accidents, and route diversions in Yaoundé, as "condiments". Excerpts from his speech can be consulted at the following link: *Actu Cameroun*, "Paul Atanga Nji: 'Maintaining public order is the Moulinex and wrongdoers are condiments'," 2023, <https://actu cameroun.com/2023/09/27/paul-atanga-nji-le-maintien-de-lordre-cest-le-moulinex-et-les-malfaiteurs-sont-des-condiments/>

9 Interview with Amélie Mouandjo, a young student at the University of Douala, June 2, 2024, in Douala.

10 This refers here to magico-religious, sectarian, and mystical practices.

11 As part of a recent study on the political participation of youth in Cameroon, we recorded that 94 out of the 100 young people with whom we conducted a focus group indicated that they were not prepared to denounce the flaws observed in society for fear of reprisals.

12 Interview with Célin Kamche Wappi, April 30, 2024, in Baganté; Interview with Félix Nyeck, Soa, May 1, 2024; Ismael Mbock, young UPC supporter, Yaoundé, May 12, 2024.

13 Interview with Célin Kamche Wappi, April 30, 2024, in Baganté.

14 Interview with Corrine Atima, graduate of the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC) and young MRC activist, Douala, May 10, 2024.

deep disagreements and family tensions, leading to situations of isolation and even rejection¹⁵. They may also provoke ruptures and divisions that put family bonds to the test. This is the case of young MRC activist Jean-Paul Mouaffi, who recounts:

I am one of those young people who have long been active in the RDPC (...). From the beginning of my involvement, my family was afraid; it is not easy to be an activist in the opposition in Cameroon. I come from a family where several people are members of RDPC. The first people to intimidate me were my own family members, but as soon as I was arrested and imprisoned, RDPC activism took a huge hit in my family. I forbade family members who were with the RDPC from visiting me in prison. I even asked my own father, who was president of an RDPC sub-section, not to send me a letter unless he resigned from the RDPC¹⁶.

Out of mistrust, some families exclude or ostracize young political opponents from family events, fearing they might be interpreted by those in power as opposition political meetings. However, the persistence of young people in their activism, combined with the deterioration of public governance in Cameroon, eventually leads families to accept their political choices and support them in their struggle. This is shown in this testimony of Corinne Atima:

But little by little, as I reassure them with my tenacity, my motivation, and my gradual results, each one brings me their support. Very few remain skeptical. Many encourage me to move forward and now believe in my capacity to do greater things¹⁷.

In the same vein, Jean-Paul Mouaffi adds:

I believe that today, given the gradual deterioration of every sector of our society, we no longer need to make much effort for people, even within my family, to understand that the fight we are leading is a noble one. There is even something like a contagious effect in my family; my activism inspires those close to me¹⁸.

“I Want to See My Children Grow Up”: An Indicator of the Vulnerability of Young Politicians

“I want to see my children grow up” reveals the concrete challenges and risks faced daily by young people engaged in Cameroon’s political field, especially when they choose to militate within the opposition. This vulnerability is first and foremost linked to the precarious legal status of the opposition in Cameroon (Guimdo Dongmo, 2014).

The Legal Precariousness of the Status of Young Political Opponents

In Cameroon, the absence of a legal status granted to the political opposition makes the figure of the opponent a vulnerable one. While in Western democracies, criticism, denunciation, and protest constitute the very essence of political opposition (Gicquel, 1993), in other contexts, as is relatively the case in Cameroon, “there are political systems in which those in power seek to suppress protest and, ultimately, to annihilate it” (Gicquel, 1993, p. 23). Textual recognition of the opposition’s status would imply acceptance of dissent, denunciation, and contestation, which are the pillars of liberal societies (Donfack Sokeng, 2003). Granting a legal status to the political opposition necessarily requires at least two things: On the one hand, the recognition of bodies authorized to speak and act on behalf of the opposition, and on the other hand, the establishment of a legal and political framework that promotes the free expression of opponents and protects them. In Cameroon, “although the constitutional rules provide conditions for the emergence of political opposition status, they neither enshrine nor guarantee recognition of such a status” (Guimdo Dongmo, 2014, p. 87).

15 Interview with Félix Nyeck, Soa, May 1, 2024; Ismael Mbock, May 12, 2024.

16 Phone interview with Jean Paul Mouaffi, young MRC activist, June 27, 2024.

17 Interview with Corinne, young MRC activist, Douala, April 12, 2024.

18 Phone interview with Jean Paul Mouaffi, June 27, 2024.

The precariousness of this legal status exposes young people involved in the opposition to multifaceted political violence. In this context, it is important to note that the challenges they face are not limited to opposition activists alone. Even among supporters of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (RDPC), young people encounter particular difficulties. Within the RDPC, an authoritarian mode of socialization prevails. Young party members face pressure from elders, who constantly demand that they wait for their turn without showing impatience, frequently invoking a widely used phrase: "Wait for Your Turn" (WYT). This expression embodies an attitude of domination and control exercised by elders over young party members, relegating them to a subordinate role and preventing active participation in political decision-making. This way of operating undoubtedly limits youth participation, keeping them in a position of perpetual waiting, where their aspirations and ideas are systematically sidelined. This generates, among some young "*rdpcistes*", feelings of frustration and marginalization, as they feel excluded from the decision-making process and see their perspectives and voices suppressed. Moreover, this authoritarian socialization reinforces existing power structures within the party, thereby perpetuating a hierarchical system where elders hold absolute control. This results in a lack of generational renewal and political stagnation, where innovative ideas struggle to emerge.

Overcoming Fear

Despite the considerable risks they face, some young people manage to overcome their fear of reprisals and actively engage in the opposition. Motivated by "the strength of convictions, the awareness of the necessity to commit oneself to transforming a society that goes beyond [selfish interests]"¹⁹ they are committed to fight for justice and democracy. Fully aware of the many dangers to which they expose themselves, some young people have told us that simply getting involved is already an act of bravery, a first step toward overcoming fear.

Another strategy used by young opponents to overcome fear is the formation of support and solidarity networks. These networks provide a space for sharing experiences, fears, and hopes with others who share the same ideals. They create an environment of emotional support and mutual reinforcement, enabling young people to draw strength collectively to confront adversity. However, what emerges from discussions with these politically engaged youth is that fear is never completely overcome. It remains a constant reality.

"I Want to See My Children Grow Up": A Marker of Disillusionment, Determination, and Radicalization

The political violence inflicted on young people who attempt to engage actively in politics can paradoxically produce, for some, a sense of disillusionment that leads them to disengage, while for others, it sparks determination and radicalization. This slogan expresses a deep concern for the future, but it also reveals the effects of political oppression on the perceptions and actions of political actors. When young people languish in unemployment and poverty and feel powerless and frustrated in the face of political oppression, some may be driven to adopt extreme positions to fight against the system in place (Loumou Mondoléba, 2020). Radicalization can take different forms, ranging from participation in demonstrations and violent protest movements to adherence to extremist ideologies or acts of political violence (UNDP, 2017).

A Marker of Disillusionment and Political Disengagement

"Opposition activism is akin to defiance of the established political system"²⁰. For this reason, young people associated with it are perceived as troublemakers and subversives to the established order. This perception of youth activism appears to be widely shared. During our interview with Félix Nyeck, he confessed that, faced with brutality and violence experienced in the political arena, many young

¹⁹ Interview with Kamche Wappi Célin, Baganté, April 30, 2024.

²⁰ Phone interview with Jean-Paul Mouaffi, June 27, 2024.

militants of the PCRN party questioned their political engagement, either after intimidation or after renouncing their membership to join the ranks of the ruling party. “Very few young activists and supporters, despite having been highly engaged in 2019 as part of the 11 Million Citizens Movement, dare to declare their allegiance today, let alone show their support or associate themselves with the party’s activities since the last elections²¹”.

This disengagement is therefore based on the observation that, from the authoritarian period to the so-called post-authoritarian period, the resources provided by the opposition to deal with repression of the dominant political order have remained stable and unchanged. The opposition is still the dominated group, whose avenues for redress in cases of rights violations remain unheard. Following the repressed protests of 2019 and 2020, Human Rights Watch (2021) reported that about 124 political prisoners were being held.

It is this uncompromising violent response to peaceful opposition protests, despite denunciations by Human Rights Watch, that partly explains the disillusionment and disengagement of most young people. This disillusionment stems from the political powerlessness of youth and from ignorance of the consequences, which can be prohibitive. Being an activist in the opposition therefore means exposing oneself to the violence of the political field, preventing them from seeing their children grow up. This confession of powerlessness does not call into question the political failures or poor governance that prevail, rather, out of fear of reprisals, many opt for resignation from their political commitments. This formula, used in the sociopolitical arena, is thus “the consecration of the brutalization of the Cameroonian political scene, where militating against the regime is synonymous with political defiance²²”. Similarly, for Célin Wappi²³, “wanting to see one’s children grow up” is an ironically used formula that means choosing silence out of fear of reprisals, rather than risking one’s life and that of one’s loved ones for a just political cause or a public denunciation of those in power²⁴.

Indeed, democracy in a post-authoritarian context, as Rousseau already reminded, is only suitable for the gods. This aporia is reinforced when we interrogate the “*what can we do?*”, which already recalls the desolation of youth in a context where engaging in politics is above all dangerous. A danger which survival depends partly on acts of submission and obedience to the dominant power. These acts are primarily cognitive and contribute to the creation of a collective memory that works toward the expansion of categories of perception aimed at demystifying the “spirit of the State” in its role of structuring competition in the political field. Consequently, doing politics also means refraining from reporting on political reality as it is perceived, and instead representing it as one would like it to be. For young people, this constitutes above all a survival mode. Thus, reporting on these silences in the political arena, from the level of youth investment in the social imaginary, marks the process of transformation of society itself. Promoting a comprehensive analysis of the events that characterize regressive transitions makes it possible to gradually account for the emergence of an authoritarian symptomatic malaise, which adapts and manifests itself to society through formulas such as those highlighted here.

Radicalization and Determination: Over-Engagement as the Opposite Effect of Political Violence on Youth

Political violence produces contradictory effects on politically engaged youth. While on the one hand, it generates feelings of fear and uncertainty regarding their safety and that of their families; on the other hand, it sometimes strengthens their determination to oppose the oppressive regime and fight for justice and democracy. To speak of youth political engagement is above all to account for new forms of political expression (Assiene Bissossoli & Salla Bezanga, 2023), as well as (in) formal behaviors and dispositions (Fillieule et al., 2017) that they mobilize and which reflect this radicalization. This over-commitment, rooted in radicalization, can go as far as threatening to take one’s own life for one’s convictions and becoming a martyr to join the ranks of prominent

21 Interview with Félix Nyeck, Soa, May 1, 2024.

22 Drawn from the interview conducted with Jean-Paul Mouaffi, June 27, 2024.

23 A young activist of the opposition party MRC.

24 Interview with Célin Kamche Wappi, Baganté, April 30, 2024.

figures of Cameroon's struggle for independence and political liberation. The radical nature of this positioning also lies in the fact that self-concern and self-esteem feed into engagement for others and the collective (Machikou, 2024).

The letter written on May 9, 2019, by Jean-Paul Mouaffi and published on May 10 of the same year illustrates the forms radicalization can take in the political field. Detained at the central prison of Yaoundé at the time, he promised to commit suicide during the national unity celebration on May 20, 2019, as a way make his voice heard. Excerpts from his letter clearly show this over-engagement:

"Despite my political sequestration, the daily torture and the constant threats inflicted by Mr. Biya's regime, I feel freer today within the MRC";

"Like the other fighters taken hostage and kept here with me at the central prison of Yaoundé, I am neither a terrorist, nor hostile to the fatherland, nor a destroyer of public property, nor a rebel, nor..."

"If Biya's regime persists in its logic of political savagery and indifference to the social degradation it has created and maintains, I will take my own life on May 20, 2019, in the name of the liberation of the Cameroonian people".

"Nothing will prevent me from offering myself as the ultimate sacrifice on that day, if nothing is done to improve the sociopolitical climate in Cameroon. Even bound, I will succeed in crossing over to the beyond, to remain alongside Um Nyobe, Ouandjie, and the others²⁵".

The treatment of opposition political actors constitutes a primary marker of rupture with the political order. The imposition of political authority in a post-authoritarian context involves several mechanisms, depending on the experiences and the level of accountability among young opposition members. The price of this activism for young opposition members is paid through arrests, death threats, imprisonment under serious legal and criminal charges, and even death. Félix Nyeck's discourse is in line with that of Jean-Paul Mouaffi when he states:

I remind my wife every day that I could leave home one morning and never return because of my political positions. I walk with my coffin on my head because I am ready to die for my convictions and political engagement; my wife knows it²⁶.

Young people in the political field are, as shown here, the product of a learned and lived experience of their relationship to politics, within opposition parties and on the broader political scene. While they re-appropriate the values, operating norms and ways of thinking of the parties they militate in, this transmission is reflected in the denunciatory discourses they mobilize in the public and media spheres. There is therefore a real socialization linked to the statement made by young "career" politicians (Combes & Fillieule, 2011). These factors allow us to view activism as a resource for positioning and classifying oppositions in the political arena. Based on the re-appropriation and use of this formula, we can measure the level of political commitment of actors in defending their positions. It is therefore an interesting discursive lever that serves both the opposition and the dominant order. It opens up the possibility of analytically arranging the reasons young people act, thereby providing them with the means to forge their determination and demonstrate political ingenuity in order to make their voices heard on the cause they are defending for change. This is the result of their socialization into a difficult relationship with power. Just as for the ruling party, "wanting to see one's children grow up" can serve as a lever for measuring the submission of political opponents to the will of the ruling order they embodies.

Indeed, the engagement of young people in the political field depends on the motivations that accompany them. The careers of young people in politics reveal the adaptations and reconfigurations of agents in their relationship to activism. They shed light on the logics of action through which young people situate their projects at specific moments in time and the degree of adherence to the principles that govern them. Political action thus raises questions about their awareness of their

²⁵ Drawn from the letter of Mouaffi Djeukou Jean Paul, published May 12, 2019, by *Cameroon-info.net*, www.Cameroon-info.net

²⁶ Interview with Félix Nyeck, Soa, May 1, 2024.

own participation trajectory and the symbolic rewards (Fillieule et al., 2017). It is worth considering here that youth participation itself enables us to grasp the meaning they attach to their engagement on the ground, as well as the institutional barriers that accompany them depending on the context.

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