

A fruitful partnership

By H.E. PAUL BIYA

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON



PAUL BIYA was appointed Prime Minister in 1975 and has held the post of President of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement since 1985, following its transformation from the Cameroon National Union party, which he had also presided over since 1983. He became President of Cameroon on 6 November 1982 following the resignation of his predecessor, Mr Ahmadou Ahidjo. He was returned to office in 1984, 1988, 1992 (by the first pluralist presidential ballot held in the country), and in 1997, 2004 and 2011 for seven-year terms.

The Republic of Cameroon is the product of a harmonious reunion between the English and French speaking Cameroons, which were separated and administered by British and French as United Nations trust territories. Cameroon is therefore a country with a rich and unique blend of a dual heritage that has enabled it to enjoy sustained historical and cultural ties with both the Anglophone and Francophone spheres in the global community.

Cameroon officially joined the Commonwealth in 1995 at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), held in Auckland, New Zealand. Since then, Cameroon has played a very active role in shaping and supporting the key objectives of development and democracy which the organisation stands for. The Commonwealth has also been very much involved in processes that have shaped the political, economic and social transformation of the country.

On the political front, the consolidation of democracy and good governance has been at the heart of Cameroon-Commonwealth political cooperation. Cameroon has benefitted from important political engagements with the Commonwealth at various levels, including high-level diplomatic visits by senior Commonwealth officials like Secretaries-General, Deputy Secretaries-General and several other delegations of senior officials and envoys. The Commonwealth walks hand-in-hand with the Cameroonian people in collective efforts to modernise and transform the political landscape into a more democratic, consensus- and dialogue-driven one. The Government of Cameroon and several other stakeholders have been working with various delegations of Commonwealth experts that have been deployed to Cameroon at different times, to hold discussions aimed at fostering political understanding and supporting a culture of peace among political actors. For instance, a Commonwealth Secretariat Special Envoy, Mr Joe Clark, co-chaired the Cameroon-Commonwealth Presidential Commission in 2005.

The fruits of this political engagement comprise a number of positive political outcomes, which include, but are not limited to:

- Deploying Commonwealth Observer Missions to monitor elections in Cameroon;
- The adoption of the law on decentralisation;
- The adoption of the law establishing Elections

Cameroon, Cameroon's elections management body, and its predecessor, the National Elections Observatory; the adoption of the criminal procedure code; the restructuring of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms; and the establishment of the Senate.

These outcomes were facilitated by Commonwealth-supported initiatives that helped us navigate through critical national situations where dialogue, tolerance and consensus were bolstered and further highlighted as mainstream values for addressing national issues.

The Government of Cameroon is committed to continue building on these collective democratic achievements and supporting the Commonwealth's work in promoting democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance.

Cameroon has also had very fruitful relations with the Commonwealth in the areas of technical and institutional development.

The Commonwealth has contributed positively in strengthening the capacity of the public administration, especially in service delivery in a number of key areas where special reform programmes have been carried out to bolster capacity building and institutional development. These interventions have been helpful in supporting our wider governance reform programmes which the country has been systematically undertaking.

A few examples include:

- The provision of the Commonwealth Secretariat Debt Recording and Management System, a software system for the management of the public debt;
- The Tourism Institutional Development and Marketing Plan;
- The adoption of Cameroon's Trade, Industrial and Investment Policies;
- The Public Services Personnel Records Management System;
- The provision of Commonwealth Scholarships;
- Placement of Experts funded by the Commonwealth Secretariat;
- Commonwealth Training Programmes in diverse domains: management of microfinance institutions, public sector reforms, ICTs, the gender policy, and agricultural sector and textile industry development.

Cameroon has also benefited from the wide network of accredited Commonwealth organisations such as the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth

of Learning, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation, the Commonwealth Business Council, now rebranded as the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, etc. These networks have served as valuable platforms for education, information and experience sharing. The overall impact on the national agenda has been positive and supportive of the necessary conditions for economic and social transformation, of which the Government of Cameroon is greatly appreciative.

This positive collaboration has been both ways. As indicated above, Cameroon plays an active role in shaping and supporting the international agenda of the Commonwealth family. Our diplomatic mission in the UK participates regularly and actively in meetings at the Commonwealth Headquarters in London, while the relevant State officials regularly attend international meetings at Ministerial and Heads of Government levels. Cameroon has also hosted several ministerial meetings as well as the 2014 Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. Cameroon also ensures the timely fulfilment of its financial contribution to the organisation.

Despite these positive achievements, it would be an oversight not to highlight some areas for possible improvement. Cameroon believes that the Commonwealth can do a lot more in improving the lives of its citizens. Cameroon would like to see a Commonwealth which is more active and influential in shaping global consensus, speaking for the voiceless, and adding greater value and dignity to the citizens of the Commonwealth family.

These concerns were emphasised in my speech when Cameroon hosted the 60th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Yaoundé in 2014. The Organisation needs to increase its leverage in this area particularly in process leading up to adoption of the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, its follow-up and implementation. The continuous relevance of the Commonwealth depends on a full engagement with its less endowed members.

In the same vein, the Commonwealth needs to utilise its full potential through the facilitation of more exchange programmes, the free movement of goods and services, the free movement of Commonwealth citizens and the transfer of technology. We would also like to see greater engagement in the creation of opportunities for education, supporting youth development and women's empowerment.

In pursuing its fundamental values and principles, there is a need for sensitivity towards the diversity and cultural relativity that the Commonwealth family enjoys.

Gearing up to the next Commonwealth Heads

of Government Meeting taking place in Malta later this year under the theme "Adding Global Value", Cameroon is determined to advocate for greater global dialogue, collaboration and international cooperation in addressing current global challenges. This will be in line with Cameroon's foreign policy and diplomatic priorities, which include:

- Regional and maritime security and the fight against piracy, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea;
- Political dialogue as a means of achieving stability within and between countries;
- Eliminating the threat posed by the Al-Qaida-affiliated Islamist group, Boko Haram;
- Peaceful resolution of border disputes between states;
- Regional economic integration;
- Development of international trade and investment;
- Serving as a bridge between the Anglophone and Francophone communities in both west and central Africa;
- Promoting a conclusive negotiations on the Post 2015 Development Agenda;
- The Fight against climate change and environment protection.

Many of these issues have also figured in the agendas of past CHOGMs and General Assemblies and other Fora of the United Nations.

To strengthen its position on the global scene, and in view of achieving the aforementioned national and foreign policy objectives, Cameroon has taken steps, both political and economic, to enable it to attain the status of an emerging nation by 2035. These steps include, among others, major investments in infrastructural development, the revision of investment laws (to create an environment conducive for business) and intensifying the fight against corruption.

The Commonwealth Business Forum will constitute a great opportunity for networking for Cameroon's business community to showcase the country's investment and trade opportunities. Investment opportunities abound in the areas of infrastructure, mining, agriculture, energy, and telecommunications. Cameroon, known for its legendary peace and stability, has one of the best investment climates in the region and is the powerhouse of Central Africa. It is a gateway to a market of approximately 300 million people.

Against this backdrop, Cameroon's membership of the Commonwealth has been positive. Though the Commonwealth – like many other inter-governmental organisations – faces some challenges, there are great opportunities which the 53-member community can capitalise on, to have an edge on the global scene. Such capitalisation would enable Cameroon to realise and further consolidate key national and foreign policy objectives.

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