

HEAD OF STATE'S MESSAGE TO THE NATION, ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARIES OF THE INDEPENDENCE AND REUNIFICATION OF CAMEROON

Fellow Cameroonians,

My dear compatriots,

On 31 December last year, I announced to you that this year we would be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of our independence, as a prelude to that of our reunification, and that the commemorations would culminate in the National Day.

To open the said events, I am addressing the nation this evening to highlight the significance and scope of our country's accession to sovereignty.

On 1 January 1960, we became INDEPENDENT. This meant that we were taking our destiny into our own hands, that we were becoming responsible for running our affairs by ourselves and that we would be accountable for our actions before History.

What was the situation of our people then? Most of us recognized ourselves more as members of our communities of origin than as citizens of the same nation. And this was no surprise given our almost colonial past. With the demise of colonial empires following the Second World War, young nationalists had however been nurturing the unlikely dream of freedom. Clearly, their struggle, and in some cases their sacrifices, contributed significantly to the accession of our people to self-determination. That is why, I repeat, we should forever remain grateful to them.

How about our country? With arbitrary and poorly demarcated boundaries, it was composed of a mosaic of administrative units and had no major communication facilities; apart from export crops, it had a closed economy and lacked adequate school and health infrastructure. It was more of a hotchpotch of territories with different languages, customs, religions, tribal systems, etc. In addition, there were the idiosyncrasies inherited from three dissimilar colonial systems.

Were we a nation? Not yet, since we had to wait for reunification with our brothers of West Cameroon to bring about the "desire to live together", that characterizes a nation.

Were we a state? Yes, according to the law, since we were no longer under trusteeship and were recognized by the international community. In reality however, the task ahead was still immense.

Upon our accession to sovereignty, forging nationhood and building a state constituted the dual challenge that faced us.

The first task was not the easiest, as it is not based on voluntarism. It must emanate from the collective consciousness of citizens and can only come about through the slow maturation of a common history. Consider the old European nations; they all took centuries to form, most often after daunting challenges. For our part, the process has been faster and, even if it must be reinforced constantly, it is undeniable that the CAMEROONIAN NATION is now a reality and its unity our most precious asset.

Building a state has been no easy task either. At the outset, we lacked qualified officers and had to make do with the staff available. Enthusiasm and devotedness often made up for the lack of experience and competence. Very quickly however, the opening of ENAM, which itself recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, helped furnish our administration with the human resources required to properly run the State and own development mechanisms. One may say that besides political institutions, Cameroon now has a skilled State administration that meets its needs.

For a people like ours, the concept of independence and thus freedom cannot be dissociated from that of democracy. Although the idea here is not to recount the historical events that preceded or followed our independence, one may say that the conditions prevailing at that time may account for (not to say justify) the authoritarian forms of government. It was however foreseeable that things had to change.

You would remember that as far back as 1982, I stated that progressive liberalization was necessary. After experimenting with multiple candidacies in the one-party system, we restored multi-party politics. Then, in the early Nineties, several laws guaranteeing the civic freedoms of association and the press were passed. Over the years, various elections have been held at different levels under conditions which we have been trying to improve in order to ensure free and fair polls.

Today, I believe I can safely say that with a President of the Republic elected by direct universal suffrage, a National Assembly comprising representatives of the majority and the opposition, a rainbow government answerable to the Assembly and an independent Judiciary, we have established a regime that meets the basic requirements of democracy. This will be supplemented by the institution of the Senate and the effective implementation of decentralization which will enable citizens to participate directly in the running of public affairs, without however jeopardizing national unity. We have also endeavoured to guarantee respect for human rights, both in the instruments in force and in the day-to-day operation of State bodies.

Unfortunately, as we know, political freedom is not sufficient to ensure freedom in general. What indeed does freedom mean to someone who is unable to eat his fill? That is why we have always believed that it cannot be dissociated from economic and social progress. This aspect of our society blueprint has been the most difficult to achieve.

Since the spread of globalization, national economies are even more dependent on global economic changes over which governments have no control. Our task has thus been compounded over the past decades by a series of crises: deterioration of the terms of trade, slowdown of growth in Europe and Asia, erratic oil and commodity price fluctuations, etc. All these phenomena have adversely impacted our economies.

We have however been able to cope with them by submitting to the stiff discipline of structural adjustment programmes. The sacrifices made by our people have, after a real recession, enabled us to witness return to growth. Unfortunately, the recent crisis has once again thwarted our efforts by reducing our exports and slowing down our investments, resulting in rising unemployment.

The idea here is not to find excuses. Who can gainsay the fact that today almost all countries- including the most powerful – are facing major economic challenges? Pending an uncertain recovery, each of them is trying to find a way out. That, of course, is what we ourselves are trying to do.

We have not however given up trying to roll back poverty. While in the domains of education and health, progress has definitely been made, it must be acknowledged that the plight of the most vulnerable segments of our population, especially in the rural areas, has not improved

considerably. Access to water, electricity and health care remains uncertain for many. On the other hand, we can say that the school and university landscape of our country has nothing in common with the situation following independence.

Furthermore, the accelerated urbanization that has taken place in recent decades as a result of high rural-urban migration is posing many new problems: housing, road systems, transport and security. With almost half of its population living in towns, Cameroon is far different from what it was fifty years back.

We have experienced another change which has happened so progressively that it has almost gone unnoticed. With the progress in school attendance and literacy as well as mass media broadcasting, our people have become open to the world. We read newspapers, listen to the radio and watch television. Our attitudes, lifestyles and ways of thinking have changed. Few of us realize how much we have changed. As we become “westernized”, if I may say so, our differences tend to fade away.

Africa is not the only continent undergoing this transformation. Even countries which had a pronounced identity have been unable to resist fully. Let us accept the positive aspects of this evolution, that is, what helps us to progress and to get closer to other peoples. However, that should not prevent us from retaining what is inherent in our true nature: solidarity, fraternity and other African virtues. We should also endeavour to preserve what is part of our distinctive genius: our culture, our national languages as well as those that have become ours. By preserving our heritage, we preserve our identity.

While we were building our country, it was incumbent on us to ensure the protection of its territorial integrity. To secure the vast territory we inherited, it was necessary to have a sufficiently large number of well-trained defence forces. We successfully performed this task and now boast an army that meets our requirements. It is essentially a deterrent force and intervenes only as a last resort.

In fact, our ideal of peace inclines us to prioritize consultation or negotiation. For this reason, we have, over the last few years, endeavoured to maintain the best possible relations with our neighbours. I think we have succeeded in that regard. The only acute problem we faced concerned the Bakassi affair. Fortunately, it was resolved in line with international law, thanks to the spirit of conciliation and the willingness for a rapprochement between the parties concerned.

After gaining international sovereignty, we had the duty to deploy a diplomatic network that meets our expectations. This was done progressively. Today, we have diplomatic missions in many capitals and in major international organizations.

For their part, they have established dozens of foreign diplomatic missions in Yaounde. Thus, we can pull our own weight on the international scene by participating in general diplomatic activity and defending our interests. I am convinced that Cameroon has quite a respectable place in world affairs.

My dear compatriots,

There are few people still alive today who experienced the heady days of independence. Most of them have passed on and with them some of their unfulfilled dreams. However, they experienced the essential thing: no longer being humiliated, holding their heads high, doing as they please and having the right to make mistakes. For most of you, this era belongs to the distant past and is in the nature of things. I am not surprised, but you should understand that I wanted to rapidly take stock of the situation that prevailed in order to measure the ground covered.

Is this a positive or negative track record? Could we have performed better? Maybe. Not so well? Certainly. Without repeating what has been said about our Nation and our State, I want to recall that our political institutions have remained stable, that social tensions have been brought under control, that we are at peace with our neighbours and that human rights and freedoms continue to be respected.

The real snag is poverty which remains an eyesore in our society. While acknowledging our shortcomings, I stated why the successive crises that were beyond our control obliged us for years to make the best of what we had and to fall short of our objectives. As the effects of the crisis are easing off, the first signs of recovery are showing and there seems to be a resumption of investments, I think we should envision the future differently.

In fact, I believe that an era is coming to an end. To be explicit, I feel that the goal we should set ourselves is to make Cameroon an EMERGING COUNTRY within a period of about twenty years. I mentioned this possibility some time ago without imagining that the recent economic and financial crisis would banish such prospect.

In the meantime, we adopted a long-term development vision which provides that by 2035 Cameroon could become (I quote) “an emerging and democratic country united in its diversity”. This implies that we will succeed in reducing poverty to a socially acceptable level, that we will become a middle-income country and that we will attain the status of a newly industrialized country. I am not closing my eyes to the fact that it is a huge challenge. However, I believe that our country has the necessary resources and that our people are capable of taking up that challenge.

A “Growth and Employment Strategy Paper” has been prepared and will serve as a framework for government action for the period 2010-2020. This document outlines the objectives of the first phase of our long-term vision and defines the strategy for attaining them. It identifies structural shortcomings that should be corrected and reviews the major infrastructures to be built as well as the productive sectors to be modernized. Lastly, it lists the projects to be implemented in the domains of health, education and vocational training.

As you can see, this is a veritable ten-year development plan that was lacking in recent years. It mainly aims at revamping our economy and thus stimulating employment and rolling back poverty. I would like you, irrespective of your place in society, to consider the implementation of this strategy as a genuine national cause and to join forces to ensure its success.

As I said a moment ago, we are going to enter a new era. To sum up, I would like to say that during the last fifty years, we built the structure of our independence. Tomorrow, we will give it the economic and social content it deserves.

Our people, who have shown proof of great courage and patience, should reap the rewards of the sacrifices they have made through an equitable redistribution of the fruits of growth.

Long live independence!

Long live Cameroon!