



## **Opposition Politics and Electoral Democracy in Cameroon, 1992-2007**

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### **Abstract**

This article seeks to assess the impact of electoral democracy in Cameroon especially in terms of the performance of the Opposition between 1992 and 2007, evaluate the internal shortcomings of opposition parties, and make a projection regarding a vibrant democratic space that will go beyond routine elections to speak to the issues preoccupying the Cameroonian masses.

### **Résumé**

Cet article vise à évaluer l'impact de la démocratie électorale au Cameroun en particulier en termes de performance de l'opposition entre 1992 et 2007, à évaluer les lacunes internes des partis d'opposition, et à faire une projection concernant un espace démocratique dynamique qui ira au-delà des élections ordinaires pour aborder les questions qui préoccupent les masses camerounaises.

### **Introduction**

The political history of modern Cameroon can be divided into four periods. The first was the period of total dependence on the colonial power which extended from 1884 to 1945 during which the country did not possess representative institutions. The second period stretched from 1945 to 1960/61 during which Cameroonians passed their apprenticeship in democracy. The third started on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1960, with the proclamation of independence in French Cameroon and the reunification of West and East Cameroons in 1961 in a federal structure, and the fourth saw the light of day on 20 May 1972 when the federal structure was abolished in what the then Head of State, Ahmadou Ahidjo termed the 'Peaceful Revolution' (Sobseh Emmanuel 2012:88).

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During the Federal structure, multiparty politics was vibrant in both the West and East Cameroons until 1 September 1966 when the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP), the Cameroon People National Congress (CPNC) and the Cameroon Union Congress from West Cameroons decided to fuse with the Union Camerounaise (UC) into a single party called the Cameroon National Union (C.N.U). According to Ahidjo, multiparty politics was a luxury and politics under this system was bitter and could easily lead the nation into civil war. However when Ahidjo left power on 6 November 1982, his constitutional successor Paul Biya changed the name of the single party to Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM) in March 1985. The CPDM single party did not last as internal and external pressures militated against multiparty electoral democracy in Africa. Cameroon could not be insulated from this wind of change. Internal pressure in Cameroon arose mainly from people's power when some civil society actors decided in February 1990 to challenge the single party system and they were all arrested and detained. This gave a leeway to Ni John Fru Ndi and a group of lawyers to file in a document in March 1990 for the creation of another party called the Social Democratic Front (SDF). This was met with reluctance and resistance by the ruling elite and the result was a bloody confrontation between the masses and the soldiers, leading to death and arrests on 26 May 1990. Triggered by the events of 26 May 1990, that led to the defiant launching of an opposition party (Social Democratic Front - SDF), multipartyism and eventually opposition parties became institutionalized following the Law of Association of 19 December 1990 (Law No. 90/056). In spite of this reform to accommodate multipartyism, the main kernel of a democratic transition to put enabling structures in place eluded the political establishment in Cameroon.

Unlike other African Countries such as Benin (1990), Mali (1991), Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo (1991) and South Africa (1994) that planned a democratic transition, the leadership of Cameroon at first resisted, then reluctantly gave in to a form of transition whose outcome fell below general expectations. Such a context only encouraged the emergence of a new elite in the political arena, next to the old ones who switched over, for the occasion, to the virtues of political pluralism (Tidjani Alou 2002:28). The setting up of Constitutional Conferences, Sovereign National Conferences and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions as modes of transition was meant to provide new political and economic paradigms suited to the demands of pluralism. As discussion forums, transition modes served as the balm of national reconciliation and as a catharsis as well as avenues to put in place reforms and structures that would change the qualities of lives of the masses.

When President Paul Biya therefore declared on 27 June 1991 at the National Assembly that ‘Je l’ai dit et je le maintiens, la conference nationale est sans objet pour le Cameroun’ (‘I insist that the National Conference is baseless in Cameroon’), Cameroonians were stunned into both rage and revolt.

Biya’s refusal to yield to popular demands for a national conference was partly due to the opposition parties’ misconception of the purpose of such a conference. Their perception was not one of overhauling the obsolete monolithic apparatus but one of impeaching and eventually stripping Biya of legitimate power. Cameroonians therefore missed a rare opportunity to reassess the gains of nation-building and to examine the expectations of a democratic renewal. What they (Cameroonians) instead got was a Tripartite Conference consisting of the ruling party, the opposition and the civil society. This conference that was held from 30 October to 18 November 1991 proved to be futile as national aspirations became mortgaged on the altar of parochialism. The main weakness of this conference was the quasi-obsessional temptations of the ruling party, which wanted rules and results for its prime benefit alone.

So without any concrete rules on the exigencies of multiparty politics, without a change of the monolithic constitution, without a defined role of the opposition, and without a clear cut line between the party and state, Cameroon set forth on the journey of electoral democracy without a map (Ngwane 1996:175).

### **Justification**

This article seeks to assess the impact of electoral democracy especially in terms of the performance of the Opposition between 1992 and 2007, to evaluate the internal shortcomings of opposition parties, and to make a projection regarding a vibrant democratic space – one that would go beyond routine elections to speak to the issues preoccupying the Cameroonian masses. It does this through a presentation of the various election data from 1992-2007, especially depicting the downward trend of opposition gains in elections. It analyses this scenario and tries to look into the future of opposition politics in electoral democracy in Cameroon.

### **Election Database**

#### ***Parliamentary Elections***

##### ***(a) 1 March 1992***

Registered Voters	4,019,562
Total Votes	2,435,443
Voter Turn out	(60.6%)

Invalid /Blank Votes	238.200
Total Valid votes	2.197.243

Party	Number of seats
Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM)	88
National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP)	68
Movement for the Defense of the Republic (MDR)	18
Union of Cameroon Populations (UPC)	06

Two opposition parties, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and Cameroon Democratic Union (UDC), boycotted the poll.

*b) 17 May 1997*

Registered Voters	4.000.000 (approx)
Total Votes	Not Available
Voter turnout	Not Available

Party	Number of seats
Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM)	109
Social Democratic Front (SDF)	43
National Union For Democracy and Progress (UNDP)	13
Union of Cameroon Populations (UPC)	05
Movement for the Defense of the Republic (MDR)	01
Union of Cameroon Populations (UPC)	01
Liberty Movement of the Cameroon Youth (MLJC)	01
Vacant	07

The Supreme Court cancelled the election results in seven constituencies due to serious irregularities. On 3 August 1997 further elections were held to fill the vacant seats. The RDPC won all of the seats, thus increasing its level of representation in the National Assembly.

*(c) 30 June 2002*

Registered Voters	Not Available
Total Votes	Not Available
Voter Turnout	Not Available

The Supreme Court nullified the result for 17 seats on account of various irregularities. By-elections were held on 15 September to fill the vacant seats.

Party	Number of seats
Cameroon People's Democratic Movement	149
Social Democratic Front (SDF)	22
Cameroon Democratic Union (UDC)	05
Union of Cameroon Populations (UPC)	03
National Union For Democracy and Progress (UNDP)	01

*(d) 22 July 2007*

Registered Voters	5.000.000 (aprox.)
Total Voters /Voter Turnout	Not Available

Party	Number of seats
Cameroon People's Democratic Movement	140
Social Democratic Front (SDF)	14
Cameroon Democratic Union (UDC)	04
National Union For Democracy and Progress (UNDP)	04
Progressive movement (MP)	01
Vacant	17

The Supreme Court nullified the results for 17 seats on account of various irregularities. By-elections were held on 15 September to fill the vacant seats.

***Presidential Elections****(a) 11 October 1992*

Registered Voters	4.195.687
Total Votes	3.015.440
Voter Turnout	71.9%

Party	% of Votes
Paul Biya (CPDM)	39.98
John Fru Ndi (SDF)	35.97
Bello Bouba Maigari (UNDP)	19.22
Adamou Ndam Njoya (UDC)	3.62

*(b) 12 October 1997*

Registered Voters	Not Available
Total Votes	Not Available
Voters Turnout	81.4%
Invalid/Blank Votes	Not Available
Total Valid Votes	3.422.055

Candidate (party)	Number of votes	% of votes
Paul Biya (CPDM)	3.167.820	92.57
Henri Hogbe Nlend (UPC)	85.693	2.50
Samuel Eboua (MDP)	83.506	2.44
Albert Dzungang (PPD)	40.814	1.19
Joachim Tabi Owono (AMEC)	15.817	0.46
Antoine N'Denabbu (RDPF)	15.490	0.45
Gustave Essaka (DIC)	12.915	0.38

The election was boycotted by three main opposition parties – the Social Democratic Front (SDF), National Union for Democratic Progress (UNDP),

Cameroon Democratic Union (UDC) and a small Party, The Union of African Population (UPA).

*(c) 11 October 2004*

Registered Voters	4.657.748
Total Votes	3.830.272
Voters Turnout	82.2%
Invalid/Blank Votes	72.051
Total Valid Votes	3.758.221

Candidates (party)	Number of votes	% of votes
Paul Biya (CPDM)	2.665.359	70.92
John Fru Ndi (SDF)	654.066	17.40
Adamou Ndam Njoya (UDC)	168.318	4.48
Garga Haman Adji (ADD)	140.372	3.74
Justice Mouafo (NPC – BUSH)	14.915	0.40
Yondo Mandengue Black (MNSD)	13.601	0.36
Ancient Ekane (MANIDEM)	13.290	0.35
Fritz Pierre Ngo (MEC)	13.122	0.35
Jean Michel Tekam	12.785	0.34
Victorin Hameni Bieleu (UFDC)	11.920	0.32
Boniface Forbin (JDP)	10.542	0.28
Djeukam Tchameni (MDI)	10.539	0.28
Jean-Jacques Ekindi (MP)	10.158	0.27
Hubert Kamgang (UPA)	7.508	0.20
George Dobgima Nyamndi (SLC)	6.730	0.18
Gustave Essaka (DIC)	4.996	0.13

**Note:** All election data were collected from the book 'Rethinking Citizenship, Politics and Governance in Cameroon'.

### Analysis

Statistics show that in 1992, opposition parties put together won 92 seats as opposed to 88 for the ruling party giving the opposition a 51.1 percent representation in Parliament. On the face of it, this would have given the Opposition a strong weapon to initiate reforms through the Assembly but for the fact that one of the Opposition parties (Movement for the Defence of the Republic) decided to form a coalition with the ruling party. That kept the opposition in a minority status in the National Assembly.

In 1997, the Opposition had 64 seats of the 180 scoring 35.5 percent of the vote.

In 2002 the Opposition had (before the rerun for 17 seats nullified by the Supreme Court), 31 seats of the 180, scoring 17.2 percent of the vote.

In 2007 (pending results of the rerun for 17 seats nullified by the Supreme Court) the Opposition had 23 seats, 12.7 percent of the vote.

So from 51.1 percent of the vote in 1992, the Opposition had plummeted in parliamentary representation to 17.2 percent in 2007.

With regards to presidential elections, the combined Opposition obtained 58.81 percent as opposed to 39.98 percent for the ruling party of President Paul Biya in 1992. Therefore, had the opposition parties presented a single candidate, they would have won the presidential elections of 1992. Nonetheless the election results were shrouded in controversy with other sources giving opposition party (SDF) leader (Fru Ndi) 37 percent, and the ruling party (CPDM) 36 percent.

The fragmentation of the Opposition, a flawed electoral system and the absence of a run-off electoral procedure deprived the Opposition from winning the first multiparty presidential elections in Cameroon in 1992.

In 1997, the Opposition combined received a dismal 7.42 percent of the vote, as opposed to 92.57 percent for the ruling party. A major reason for this ridiculous performance by the Opposition was the fact the three main opposition parties (Social Democratic Front, National Union for Democratic Progress and the Cameroon Democratic Union) boycotted the election.

In 2004 the Opposition all together received 29 percent of the vote, as opposed to 70.92 percent for the ruling party.

So from a 58.81 percent figure in the presidential elections in 1992, the combined opposition dwindled in its share of the vote, attaining only 29 percent in 2004.

It can be seen that for both parliamentary and presidential elections since 1992, the Opposition has shown a steady decline.

### **Categories of Opposition Parties**

The circumstances that led to the emergence of opposition parties in Cameroon were predicated on the twin phenomena of challenge and change. Challenge was based on the need for the establishment to reform itself and to give access to alternative voices while change referred to a political agenda that was meant to overturn the ruling oligarchy in favour of a new dispensation by a change of regime.

Initially as in most African countries, the resurgence of multipartyism in Cameroon was borne out of the hunger for change, hence the liberation theology preached by most opposition parties became the democratic mantra. Liberation theology according to these parties meant that change could come to Cameroon only when the incumbent President Paul Biya was unseated. To them Biya the person was the stumbling block to democratic development in Cameroon.

In Cameroon the slogan 'Biya must go' was used by opposition parties as a template for achieving power. But even the most radical of the opposition failed to go beyond what Celestin Monga has termed 'slogans in line with populist illusions'. In other words, transforming liberation theology into a structured ideological philosophy seemed a task beyond the power of the opposition parties.

Since the quest for political pluralism comes down to the installation of multipartyism, opposition parties are expected to be distinct from and autonomous of the ruling party (Olukoshi 1998:19). Some opposition parties in Cameroon on the other hand believed that the real problem confronting political change went beyond Biya the person (liberation theology) to a complete cleansing of the dictatorial system which Biya had come to incarnate. To them structured ideological philosophy hinged on constitutional reforms and the putting in place of vibrant democratic institutions.

With no clear constitutional provision on the status of opposition parties in Cameroon (unlike a country like Mozambique where the Opposition is treated as a government in waiting), opposition parties in Cameroon have through various electoral processes given themselves a political identity.

### ***The Opposition of Liberation***

The SDF approach appears to focus on a zero-sum arrangement. Referred to as an external' opposition by Tangie Fonchingong, this category of opposition is formed outside the ruling constellation and often against the background of deep-seated disagreement, conflict and protest. It sees itself as a symbol of change and fights to the end for a radically alternative system (Tangie 1998:125). Its political mind-set is based on a 'Biya must go' strategy.

### ***The Opposition of Co-optation***

This approach is characterized by the desire to share power and the prebends or spoils of power with the ruling party. Attracted by the obnoxious notion of broad-based governance or a government of national unity, this category of opposition poses no fundamental challenge to the regime. It shores up the regime and seeks mainly to ensure its own share of the spoils rather than presenting radically different proposals (Tangie 1998:125). The mind-set of such opposition is based on a win-win situation. All through the electoral process in Cameroon, the NUDP, MDR, MLJC and UPC (the latter being the only opposition of liberation in Cameroon since 1948) and quite recently Minister Issa Tchiroma's party are opposition parties that belong to this nomenclature. Its political paradigm is based on a 'Biya must share' strategy.



### ***The Opposition of Proposition***

This kind of political activity is characterized by a strong ideological bent, working more on ideas rather than revolutionary propaganda. Emerging from the mass base within the same party, the opposition of proposition seeks mainly for a redress of grievances either in terms of party policy or party performance. It may sometimes break away as splinter group but more often than not stays within as mainstream members disagreeing at their own risk and peril, with a party focus. The case of the Progressive or Modernist wing of the CPDM comes out with its lists of grievances presented in 'The White Book' written by Chief Milla Assoute. The postures by the CPDM Parliamentary candidate the Honourable Adama Modi Bakary and the erstwhile CPDM Parliamentarian, Honourable Paul Ayah, now leader of the People's Action Party (PAP) to break away from socialised violence (irrational obedience to party ideology) are cases in point. The political mind-set of this group is based on a 'Biya must change' strategy.

In sum it is fairly easy to distinguish the opposition of conviction from the opposition of convenience within the electoral process in Cameroon, with the latter always enjoying a strong numerical advantage, albeit with a weak ideological stance, over the former. In the end we have witnessed an opposition that has over the years become a vehicle for the maximization of the interests of political opportunists and not frameworks for mobilizing popular forces for genuine change (Tangie 1998:127). This has taken its toll on our democratization process which according to Francis Nyamnjoh has served mainly as 'face powder', used to justify reactionary propaganda by the ruling party and its acolytes and revolutionary propaganda by the opposition (Nyamnjoh 1999:115).

### **Shortcomings of the Opposition**

It is generally accepted that the playing field in Cameroon does not work in favour of opposition parties winning elections. With no genuine independent or neutral persons within the Independent Electoral Commission (be it the National Elections Observatory or Elections Cameroon), and with a contentious new electoral code adopted by a CPDM majority parliament in March 2012, the elections have been reduced to a two-horse race between the CPDM and its French translation – RDPC. In effect there are a lot of exogenous factors that deprive the opposition from starting the election race from the same blocks as the ruling party – disenfranchisement, a nonchalant international community, low civic participation, mass rigging, sterile political debates occasioned by the trading of accusations of illegitimacy between the ruling party and the opposition parties, and so on (Fonchingong 2004:35).

But apart from these failings, there are problems that are inherent in the modus operandi and structures of opposition parties in Cameroon. They include:

### ***A Lack of Internal Democracy***

The first thing that one notices is that all opposition parties have as Chairmen or Presidents those who founded the parties. So, for close to two decades, the same people who created these parties are at the helm of affairs (Ngwane 2004:21) Paradoxically, most of these opposition members were hell-bent on pushing the ruling party leader Paul Biya out of power when he was 'only' eight years into his term of office as President of the country (1982-1990) and 'only' five years as Chairman of his CPDM party (1985-1990).

The case of the main opposition party (SDF) is a cause for concern. Apart from the tenacity syndrome of its leader, Article 8.2 of the party's constitution raises issues around the role of dissent versus debate, and discipline versus dictatorship. Elected mayors have been dismissed for not complying with the caprices of the National Investiture Committee. The axe of Article 8.2 has fallen on militants who opposed policies or performances of the party hierarchy. Yet it must be recalled that the SDF was founded 'to rid the Cameroonian society of a system that deprives people from being free men or otherwise punishing them for daring to think freely, associate freely, assemble peacefully and freely'.

This long tenure of leadership at the helm of all opposition parties has resulted in party clientelism, personality cults, and the personalization of power.

### ***A Lack of an Opposition Leadership Consensus***

Since the creation of opposition parties, attempts at instituting an identifiable, credible and consensual leadership and programme have failed. Unlike other African countries that have a clear leadership within the Opposition (Gabon, Zambia, Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe), the case of Cameroon differs widely. Ni Fru Ndi would have easily stood out as a rallying point as opposition leader owing to his grassroots support, but he has been met with contempt for his relatively 'low academic' baggage and because of mistrust for his Anglophone origin. Fru Ndi's own inflexibility and temper tantrums have sometimes not helped matters.

### ***Broken Strategic Alliances***

Alliances formed before elections tend to be broken even before the elections take off. The 'Directorate', 'Union for Change', 'Allied forces for Change', 'Coalition for National Reconciliation and Reconstruction', the 'G7', and

now the 'Republican Pact' (2012), have not been as coherent and programme-focused as for example, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) by the opposition in Kenya, set up for the 2002 Presidential elections, resulting in a victory with 62.2 percent of the vote.

### ***Disconnection with Democratic Development***

Most opposition parties concern themselves with what happens during elections and not what takes place between elections. In other words, within the five years that span municipal/ legislative elections and the years that span presidential elections, the opposition parties do not connect with the population on issues of daily survival (power cuts, fuel price hikes, inflation, water outages, unemployment, industrial action, and so on). Nor do they agitate continuously around government policies (IMF policies, sub-regional or continental disaffection, for instance). This is compounded by the poor performance of some of the elected opposition party representatives in local councils and the National Assembly.

To quote Achille Mbembe, it is necessary for the opposition to define a real strategy towards a social struggle (social democracy and democratic development) that is adapted to the present Cameroonian conditions (Mbembe 2004:12).

### ***Lack of Linkages with Activist Elements of Civil Society***

One of the most important groups in the pro-democracy movement is the activist elements in civil society, which include the human rights lobby, minority rights groups, movements for the empowerment and participation of marginalized groups such as women and youth, students and labour, the Church and the media (Ake 2000:135). The opposition in Cameroon built organic linkages with these groups in the early 1990s, but the relationship has strained due to so many reasons. Yet it was the youth that gave power to succeeding opposition leaders turned Presidents in Senegal, like Abdoulaye Wade in 2000 and Macky Sall in 2012; it is the feminization of power policy that Paul Kagame of Rwanda survives on, while the opposition leader and Prime Minister Morgan Tswangirai of Zimbabwe feeds on workers' union (himself a product of it) and most recently on the church.

### **Projections**

In my opinion the real battle for the sustenance of democracy in Cameroon lies in what happens between now and future presidential elections. This battle in my view would take on either a positive peaceful or a negative peaceful avenue or both.

### ***Positive Peaceful Avenue***

Politics is the art of the possible and no one can rule out the possibility of Paul Biya's disengagement from subsequent presidential elections in Cameroon. Were he to do so then the ruling party would be forced into searching from among their ranks for a moderate yet benevolent disciplinarian leader. Such a leader's mission would be to walk the talk of balanced development, equitable resource allocation, and the West Cameroonian real or perceived identity of systematic victimhood. On the other hand, the successorship hypothesis provides the opposition with a beacon of hope. If a successor to President Biya did not sustain enough party consensus it could force some of the opposition of proposition militants in the CPDM to join camps with the opposition of liberation, the opposition of co-optation and activist elements of civil society to win fresh elections. It happened in Kenya when Daniel Arap Moi chose Uhuru Kenyatta as the KANU party leader, giving room for the joint opposition alliances (NARC) to win. If Biya's successor within the CPDM party did not command some charisma and aura, he could lose an election to the opposition presidential candidate, as it happened in Sierra Leone in 2007.

Were President Biya to turn his back on future elections, he would have to assume a neutral statesmanlike status (hints of which have been recurrent in his recent speeches), and not interfere with the electoral process. He has always wanted to be remembered as the person who brought democracy to Cameroon, and it would be in his interest to leave the scene with that legacy. With a law that was adopted by Parliament in 2011 giving the President immunity from criminal prosecution after leaving office, the fear of quitting office and being pursued for criminal offences could be allayed.

Ahmed Tedjan Kabbah, in spite of his lacklustre performance as President of Sierra Leone for ten years has been praised for his non-interference in the 2007 electoral process which brought the opposition to power. Mathieu Kerekou of Benin and Ould Ahmed Taya of Mauritania are of this same democratic school.

The second condition would be for the President in collaboration with all political beneficiaries to reform or re-examine the nature of elections in Cameroon.

Third, the electoral law needs to be revised to allow Independent Candidates to run for presidential elections without the infamous 300 signature clause. Related to this would be the need for a second round or run-off electoral process to be introduced during future presidential elections. Also in this connection, the civil service, the judiciary and the army must be depoliticised (Mbile 1990:14).

Fourth, while the elite should resist peddling compensatory development advantages by parties, the Cameroonian electorate would have to rise above its present inertia, its blind party adherence, and refuse to be cheaply bought

off by allurements and material inducements (bags of rice and bottles of beer). The youth in particular must see the long term advantage of building a sustainable development policy for Cameroon rather than trivial immediate interests that border on greed and gluttony. This means constant political education should be provided by activist elements of the civil society with funding assistance from development agents.

### ***Negative Peaceful Avenue***

If the positive peaceful avenue fails, at best activist elements or pro-democracy movements in civil society may throw caution to the winds and shed all party influences to flood the streets for a repeat of the 1991 Ghost town experiences, and the February 2008 mass demonstrations, but this time on their own terms. This happened in Guinea in 2007 and 2008 when the populace forced their agenda on the political class. At worst, 'khaki' rule may rear its head, as used to be the case when civilian chaos and predatory governance jeopardised genuine democracy and national unity, leading to army intervention.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of all external odds, the opposition in Cameroon still survives, albeit waning in numerical strength, controversial in ideological focus, and riven with leadership tussles. This is symptomatic of the liberal democratic choice most African countries adopted rather than a peculiar disease of the opposition in Cameroon (Ngwane 2004:18). From all indications, the green tree of nation-statehood has not yet borne the yellow fruits of national cohesion. Perhaps a new democratic transition bringing all active forces together in an All-Cameroonian Congress could help chart a new course that would go beyond routine elections and usher in bold, creative and indigenous development programmes that resonate with human and infrastructural progress.

But before then it would be necessary for the opposition in Cameroon to shed itself of its embedded and shifting political predatory metaphors of grievance, greed and griotism to embrace a new political patriotic dispensation of values, views and vision.

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