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Central Africa

Social struggles and the birth of a new consciousness

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The Yaoundé Summit of Central African heads of state – Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic and Chad – was held during the second half of 2016, a fairly volatile period in the sub-region. [1] Alongside the Central African Republic, where the violence which began in 2013 has sporadically re-emerged; Equatorial Guinea where, in order to develop his “Abayak holding” and his “shares in all the economic sector” the autocrat Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (in power since 1979 when he ousted his uncle, the previous president), had himself re-elected in April with 97% of the vote with his repressive apparatus dissuading any popular mobilisation; and the Republic of the Congo, where opposition to the regime has generated a confused and murderous military situation which began in Brazzaville and has since spread to the neighbouring department of Pool; the three other countries of the sub-region entered 2017 in an atmosphere of popular mobilisation.

In Cameroon, the financial-economic situation is less critical, despite the fall in customs income following the Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union. [2]. However the current wave of demands for a return to federalism in Cameroon reflect above all a denunciation of social injustice, discrimination on linguistic bases, unleashed by teachers in the Anglophone area against a state under Francophone domination. It seems, unfortunately, that this social dimension has not enjoyed an effective solidarity in the Francophone zone. This could be damaging to the unitary reactions needed to respond to the anti-social attacks by the Biya government, even if the coming of an election year will tend to render the ruling faction a little cautious.

In Chad, “sixteen measures” have been announced, some months after the victory at the presidential elections – considered as fraudulent and followed by a ban on public demonstrations – of Idriss Déby, provoked a mobilization of trade unions, citizen’s associations and political parties rejecting the popular classes having to pay for the burden of the bad organization of the national economy in general, and the poor management of oil revenues in particular. The fall of the price per barrel of oil and Boko Haram are not sufficient explanations for this movement of opposition. As the financial situation did not allow the payment of civil service wages from September, leading to accumulated arrears, the teachers unions supported by the students union launched a strike. The march of women from the Union of Chad Trades Unions, planned for November 8, 2016, was prevented by the regime, who had recalled perhaps that the popular demonstrations that brought down Blaise Compaoré had been preceded by a similar march of women. Four months of strikes, during which the teaching unions were joined by the trade unions in health and the judiciary, paralyzing the civil service, all demanding the payment of wage arrears and the pensions of the retired, as well as the withdrawal of the measures concerning them as well as the students, and the liberation of imprisoned activists, followed. In mid January 2017, the strike was suspended for a month.

Two weeks later the vote on a new law, restricting the right to strike, was not recognised by the trade unions, conscious of the relationship of forces in their favour. The unions democratically decided on a one month truce (prolonged by two weeks in mid-February 2017) to allow the government to reflect on other solutions than those of structural adjustment. The refusal by the “Mouvement d’éveil citoyen” (“Citizens’ Awakening Movement” - a platform of associations for the defence of human rights, political parties, independents and so on, created in late December 2016 and supporting the social movement) to respect its banning, announced by the minister of the interior, augurs the type of welcome which will be reserved to the stubbornness of the government in attacking social gains and liberties.

In Gabon, opposition to the fraudulent result of the presidential elections of August 2016 has been bloodily repressed by the Ali Bongo regime, without however managing to crush a people sick of Bongo’s grip over the country. Thus, parallel to the mobilisation of the political opposition, the teaching unions in the public sector launched a strike,

boycotting the autumn return to school and delaying it by one month. Their union coordination, the “Convention nationale des syndicats du secteur de l'éducation” (Conasysed), on unlimited strike since the return to school, renewed their action in late November 2016. The teachers are demanding the improvement of their working conditions – with the support of the pupils who have, for example, demonstrated in their support in the main towns on February 21st, 2017. How can one teach and learn in classes of one hundred and fifty pupils (from primary to twelfth grade)? A situation which existed well before the fall in price of the barrel of oil.

It stems rather from a contempt for the popular classes, whose children can only go to the public sector schools, from a head of state with other priorities: “For 7 years under the presidency of Ali Bongo Ondimba, successive governments have not built any schools, secondary education colleges or universities whereas over the same period 863 billion FCFA (around 1/3 of the national budget for one financial year) have been devoted to the organisation of sporting competitions”. [3] In this period of alleged financial difficulty, the egocentrism of one individual and his court (supported here by the oil company Total, itself with image problems), prioritises sport not only over education but also other important social sectors: “the 463 billion FCFA budget allocation for the organisation of the African Cup of Nations (CAN) soccer tournament in 2017 exceeded the budgets allocated to national education, health and the construction of housing and municipal facilities, which was 441 billion FCFA in 2016... The budget for CAN 2017 remained constant despite the slowing up of economic growth whereas the budgets for priority programmes have all suffered cuts varying from – 6% for national education to – 42% and – 43% for health and agriculture” (idem, p. 28).

Some of these billions have been added to Gabon's public debt. The “Trade Union Unitary Dynamic” involving around forty unions opposed to social injustice and the coming structural adjustment appealed with others for the boycott of CAN 2017. Thus, the opening of this competition took place in a newly constructed stadium which was half empty. This signalled a certain popular determination to not give way to diversion and not to accept paying the bill of a management of national wealth and the state over four decades which has served the scandalous enrichment of one family (Bongo), proprietor of the Delta synergie holding company, the Gabonese capitalist octopus. The magistrates' union went on strike from November 2016 to mid-February 2017.

Towards the birth of a new social consciousness?

The first wave of neoliberal structural adjustment favoured “democratisation” in an Africa dominated by single party regimes and appalling social injustices and inequalities. In the area covered by the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, the ruling autocrats have not really been shaken, with the exception of Congo DRC where, after a sovereign national conference, followed by a de-presidentialised transition, the former autocrat was defeated electorally in 1992. But five years later he returned to power, following a war co-financed by France under Chirac-Jospin and the oil company Elf, aided by Angola. A “democratisation” sold by the neoliberal capitalist ideological complex I (from the political scientists to the organisations of “civil society” via the international financial institutions) as “market economy and multipartyism” accompanied by a dynamic “civil society” conforming to this definition of democracy. Thus, in this “end of history” ambiance, multipartyism was realised in this sub-region as the coexistence of the autocrat's party with an opposition, in general supportive of the capitalist economy – with sometimes conflictual situations expressing the refusal of an alternation in the control of the “cake”.

This consensus on capitalism accentuated capitalist accumulation at the expense of the public treasuries, by the autocratic political-mafiosi factions, and the rise of local capitalists, as factor and expression of the growth of inequalities and of the social injustices denounced during the struggles evoked above. Do these latter, the premises of struggle against the new wave of structural adjustment, indicate the birth of a new social consciousness among the popular classes opposing the harmful social consequences of neoliberal structural adjustment, and the beginning of a systematic critique of capitalism and imperialism? A new social consciousness opposing not just the local capitalist

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autocracy but also combating the sub-regional structures of integration of capitalist pan-Africanism (the African Union is currently preparing a continental free trade zone on the model of those existing or being negotiated elsewhere in the world)? A capitalism which, it should always be recalled, given the persuasive force of its machine or its ideological complex – is naturally the producer/reproducer of injustice and social inequality.

The birth of such a new social consciousness among the popular classes would demand the construction of solidarities in action and reflection among the organisations of those classes (rural and urban), of different types, like the Mouvement d'éveil citoyen in Chad or the Dynamique unitaire syndicale in Gabon. Such solidarities can help avoid reproducing the situations post-Ben Ali and post-Mubarak. Solidarities not only in the national space, but also in the sub-region, indeed beyond.

The popular classes and their organizations must build solidarity-based sub-regional responses, rooted in an internationalism (African, global) which is ecological and emancipatory of the exploited and oppressed, to the questions of the CFA franc, the new wave of structural adjustment, the continental free trade zone and the economic partnership agreements with the European Union. [4]

*This is extracted from a longer article in French published in **Inprecor** n° 637/638, mars-avril 2017 [“CEMAC : Retour À l'ajustement structurel neoliberal et mobilisations populaires”](#).*

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[1] These countries make up the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC from its French initials).

[2] As Cameroon's agricultural produce is exported to the European Union it has concluded, alone, an interim EPA which entered into force in August 2016. A month later the customs income losses – commodities coming from the EU entering Cameroon without customs duties – were officially evaluated at 51 million FCFA (around 77,000 â,-)

[3] Mays Mouissi (supervisor), [“Gabon : état des lieux et impacts de la crise post-électorale”](#), novembre 2016, p. 13.

[4] The European Union, opposed to any renegotiation, is blackmailing the five states of the CEMAC who have not yet ratified Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU. But even the ruling Central African elites are frightened by the immensity of the losses in customs income which the entry into force of these agreements would occasion as well as the competitiveness of the commodities exported by the EU.