

# Cameroon — Africa's happy exception

by Brian Murphy

President Amadou "Al Haji" Ahidjo left as he had ruled for twenty-two years. Without warning he announced his resignation to a stunned populace during a radio broadcast on the evening of November 4, 1982, as the tropical nation emerged from another steamy rainy season. The next day Prime Minister, and long-time designated successor, Paul Biya was installed at the presidential palace in the capital, Yaoundé.

The whole operation was over in a flash. Like so many other political, military and economic manoeuvres carried out by Ahidjo during his long reign, it was fast, efficient and unquestioned. There was no rancorous public debate, no snubbed alternative candidate swearing undying opposition. There was, in fact, little to be said beyond some speculation on the unnamed illness that had driven one of Africa's few universally-acclaimed post-colonial leaders from the pinnacle at the early age of fifty-eight.

There would be no dramatic revelations, no political upheaval, no violent secession, no series of reports chronicling drought, debt, disease and disaster. This was generally expected by all who knew this nation of eight million. If there are any success stories on this sad continent, Cameroon is one.

## **An unlikely prospect**

Yet in 1960 few would have predicted anything but disaster when Britain and France cut loose the Cameroonian protectorates they had managed since taking them from Germany during World War I.

Ahidjo was installed by the French in 1958, and faced a rebellion in three regions organized by the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC). That party had been fighting for independence since 1948. The country itself was inside an artificial border drawn around the cultural shatter-zone between the Niger and Congo river basins. Two hundred ethnic groups speaking at least six major languages in more than one hundred dialects lived in rural communities little touched by modern institutions.

The northern Islamic population (21 percent) herding their livestock on the Sahelian plains straddling ancient trade routes across the desert had little in common with the farmers and coastal traders living on central mountain plateaus and southern equatorial forests who were either Christian (36 percent) or followed various animist beliefs.

The smaller British-run western area, approximately 20 percent of the country, had been administered as part of Nigeria for years. The local plantation economy was quite

well developed by colonial standards. A useful educational system produced good literacy rates and a small but vibrant intellectual environment. There was an active community development department which sponsored various cooperative ventures.

The eastern area featured small European enclaves dotted through a dense hinterland of isolated villages. A torpid colonial administration managed the export of surplus foodstuffs and processed bauxite from Gabon. Any social development was due to the activities of Catholic missionaries, many from Quebec. Very little had changed since the Germans left.

## **Ahidjo sets course**

With five battalions of French troops, a squadron of fighter bombers and the blessings of those multinational corporations with interests in the western plantations or in trade facilities at the eastern port of Douala, Ahidjo set out in the early sixties with a policy of unity at any cost. It seemed like an outline for the sort of strife-torn saga which came to afflict Cameroon's neighbors, particularly Nigeria, Zaire, Chad and the Central African Republic.

But Ahidjo turned out to be just right for the job. He had a respect for traditional elites, toleration for religions, and a deft hand with the purse strings of patronage. This created well-balanced regional and national administrations, in which allegiance to the bureaucratic machine was encouraged by placing administrators outside their region of origin.

The enigmatic President, always a private person, had a penchant for constitution-building and a Gaullist notion of "La Patrie," coupled with a knack for image-making he used to promote himself as "first citizen, arbitrator and custodian of the keys," rather than as "immortal father of the nation."

Finally, Ahidjo showed a ruthless antipathy to anyone clouding his vision of the new Cameroon. This led to a series of assassinations and mass killings during the campaign against the UPC. Two population groups, the Bamiléké and the Bassa, were virtually quarantined away

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