Christian churches and the democratization conundrum in Cameroon

In Cameroon by the late 1980s, the one-party system of governance, which had involved heavy state-control and planning of the political, social and economic activities (the so-called developmental state), was widely acknowledged to have reached a dead-end. Standard economic indicators such as gross domestic product and income per capita were declining as the ruling elites high-handedness of was increasingly facing popular resistance. The exigencies of global capitalism, with its accumulationist drive, requires that states restructure their politics by embracing democracy, and their economies by cutting back government expenditure, privatizing and deregulating business activities. Done in the service of a free market, economic efficiency and growth, this constitutes the Washington Consensus, backed by the World Bank and the IMF and used as conditions for loans (Sharon Beder 2003). The reintroduction of multi party politics in Cameroon in the current drive to democratize sub-Saharan Africa should be understood within this international atmosphere.

Twin developments -the reconfiguring of global capitalism and the poor performance of African economies- would leave indelible imprints on many aspects of Cameroon’s national political and social life, aspects such as the emergence of hegemonic forces, the intensification of ethnic group politics, the growth of secessionist and irredentist movements, and regionalism (Mbare 1992; Nyamnjoh 1999; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2000; Mbuagbo 2002). These developments indicate that the state in Cameroon, as in most of Africa, has not
succeeded in winning over large sections of the population, and therefore the current crisis of governance exposes and widens the gap between the state and sections of the national population.

It is in this atmosphere that Christian churches in Cameroon, in line with their vocation to preserve the inalienable rights of humanity, are increasingly articulating a social and political discourse by bringing pressure to bear on the regime (Nyamnjoh 2002; Mbuagbo and Neh Fru 2003; Mbuagbo and Akoko 2004). Church-State-relations in Cameroon are largely a function of opposing understandings and interpretations of the meaning of democracy as it applies to the management of state affairs. The nexus of good governance- transparent, impartial, and accountable redistributive functions of the state, and issues of civil liberties-have become central in the churches’ concern to ensure that all Cameroonian political stake holders adhere to agreed-upon democratic principles.

The religious authorities assume that their efforts will curb the arbitrary exercise and abuse of power. Such efforts are congruent with what Garner (2000) and Konings (2003b) see as “renewal” within Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, accompanied by the emergence and growth of many Pentecostal churches with a charismatic message of salvation. The role of religion in Cameroon’s politics should be understood in the context of ordinary citizens’ struggles to meet their daily needs, and a pertinent question is whether religion has emerged to serve as an anchor on which people can rely, given the state’s inability to provide their basic needs and defend their fundamental rights.

Liberation theology, in form and content, has become a pervasive force in the churches’ desire to realize human rights and social justice, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and local legislation.1 Has liberation theology come to liberate Cameroonians? and to what extent and with what means have the churches engaged in these endeavors? What are some of the underlying challenges inherent in the process of participating in the making of a “new” Cameroon?

Rationalizing the emergence of liberation theology in Cameroon

From creation to God’s direct interaction with the world and man, the issue of liberation in all the forms of human enslavement has been an important focus (Atem 2000). From the exodus to the cross, believers have understood that God’s

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1 Liberation theology calls for the church to combine preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments with a deep commitment to social justice: the church should announce in word and action an integral form of salvation, or liberation, from all manifestation of sin, and not merely offer individuals the means of personal salvation through the sacraments.
intention has been to liberate the oppressed and the captive, so liberation theology could be conceived as a theology of relief from all forms of human indignity—material, moral and spiritual. Today millions of people are deprived of their basic inalienable rights by regimes that keep them in near-total servitude. Therefore any Christian and Christian organization that fails to stand up against such practices by any government “ceases to be the light and the salt of the world,” thereby rendering Christianity irrelevant and inconsequential. Atem concludes that Christ himself was never a mute and passive accomplice in the politics, since he engaged in activities that challenged the practices of the political authorities. It is perhaps with this ethical precept to reject slavery and oppression that the Presbyterian and the Roman Catholic churches in Cameroon are engaged in trying too create a country that respects democratic values, such as respect for human rights and transparency in the management of state affairs.

Before now, the impact of Christianity on politics in Africa, especially in the creation of awareness through its educational institutions (Mazrui 1978), served to awaken Africans, particularly the Western educated elite, to the idea that the colonial assumption of the inferiority of the black race was founded, not on any scientific principles, but on pure racism. In Africa, this awareness marked the early beginnings of the rejection of colonialism and emergence of nationalism. It is in the light of these reflections that some Christian churches in Cameroon have begun trying to make their voices heard against the sociopolitical ills that have eaten deep into the fabric of the country.

The roots of liberation theology can be traced to Latin America in the 1930s, when popular movements began agitating locally against capitalism. Their promoters believed that poverty, alienation, and exploitation were results of capitalism, and the only way of achieving authentic development for the region was to have economic, social and political liberations from the capitalist economies, especially the most powerful one, that of the United States of America. This liberation also implied a confrontation with these groups’ natural allies, their compatriots who controlled the national power structures. Because of urbanization and industrialization, the movements (most frequently of socialist inspiration) demanded greater participation in economic and political life. Political parties of a populist bent took advantage of these movements, but the crisis of developmentalist policies, the appearance of multinational businesses, their growing control of the economy of Latin America, and the rise of militant peasants masses were all were responsible for the loss of political leadership, at different times in different countries, and led to a process of political radicalization. The reaction of the defenders of the established order was even more aggressive; many resorted to severe and brutal forms of repression (Gutierrez 1977).
In the face of all this, individual Christians and the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, were becoming more politically aware. Priests in ever-increasing proportion were interested in participating in the pastoral decisions of the church, but above all, they wanted the church to break its ties with an unjust order and to fight for the masses, who, in their view, suffered from misery and deprivation. Some priests participated in politics, often in alignment with revolutionary groups. Consequently, some of them were murdered or deported, Christians persecuted, the Roman Catholic press attacked, and ecclesiastical premises searched by the political authorities (Gutierrez 1977). The Vatican did not always support the priests, and its lack of support at times led to friction between Bishops and representatives of the pope.

At the same time, Pentecostalism in Latin America shunned liberation theology and received governmental support. It became a haven for the masses, who believed it provided them with nourishment and spiritual sustenance in the midst of economic hardship (Stoll 1990). In shantytowns around large Brazilian cities, it grew rapidly in popularity (Haralambos 1980). While some Roman Catholic priests were blaming the government for poverty, Pentecostal ministers were telling their followers that poverty resulted from sin. The government condoned Pentecostalism and jailed some of the more-outspoken priests. Worried over the expansion of Pentecostalism, Pope John Paul II in his Santiago meeting in 1992, pointed out that Christians did not find in their ministers the strong sense of God, and that was why they moved to Pentecostal groups to seek religious life; he blamed the priests for involving themselves in liberation theology instead of their parishioners’ spiritual needs (Cleary and Steward, Gambino 1992).

In Cameroon before the beginning of President Paul Biya’s era in 1982, churches, particularly the mainline churches, played a major role in education and health. However, due to the sociopolitical and economic atmosphere they paid little or no attention to liberation theology. For instance, on 12 March 1962, Ahmadou Ahidjo promulgated a decree prohibiting Cameroonian from making any statements, political or otherwise, that could be construed as critical of his regime, the Cameroon National Union party, or any public authority. Churches were therefore circumspect in addressing political issues. In 1982, the shadow of the Bishop Ndogmo affair was still hanging over all churches. Appointed in 1964, Ndongmo was the first Roman Catholic Bishop of Nkongsamba, a diocese that covered all the Bamileke area. In the late 1960s, the Union des Populations du cameroun (UPC) began an armed uprising against the state and the French, and the government responded brutally. People believed that Bishop Ndongmo

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2 Latin America has been overwhelmingly Roman Catholic for centuries. With the introduction of Pentecostalism, in the early twentieth century, Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism, gained ground at its expense (Brain 1998; Chesnut 1997).
had sided with the “rebels”: he had preached against the government’s repression of the local people, and had threatened that he would urge the people of his diocese not to pay taxes. He was arrested, taken to the military prison in Yaounde, and interrogated for months. In January 1971 a military court convicted him of treason and sentence him to death by firing squad, but this sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He was sent to a notorious camp in Tchollire, where he had no access to a radio or newspaper, and was kept away from other prisoners. He was freed after five years, just before an election -which enabled Ahidjo to present himself as merciful. However, it is believed that the pardon was part of an agreement between the state and the Vatican according to which Ndongmo was to leave Cameroon for Rome. After living in Rome for a few years, he moved to Canada where he became a citizen. He died in Canada in 1992 and his body was brought back to Cameroon and buried with pomp in his cathedral in Nkongsamba.

Because the economy of Cameroon during the Ahidjo regime (1960 and 1970s) was buoyant, Cameroonians did not face economic challenges, though the political atmosphere was not free (Konings 1996; Takougang and Krieger 1998). When, under the leadership of Paul Biya, Cameroon started facing socio-economic and political collapse, some churches began challenging the political and economic structures and advocating political change; their efforts to bring reforms into the management of the country were not unconnected with what was happening in African countries that were facing similar problems at the same time. In 1990, Biya repealed the 1962 anti-subversion decree. Cameroonian churches then openly began calling for reforms. Churches in Africa during this period played, a major role, as they still do. They have been directly involved in pressing on dictators to effect political change, and even in presiding over the change itself. In some countries, churches have forced dictators to convene national conferences, at which a wide range of groups have discussed the future and initiated political and economic reforms. A remarkable aspect of these conferences was that church leaders were called to preside over.

In Cameroon, the churches that have ceaselessly called for political and social reforms have been the mainline churches, particularly the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). This chapter is based on the contributions of these churches to Cameroon democracy, and their efforts in seeing that social justice prevail.

The PCC is the historical and constitutional successor to the Basel Mission Church in Cameroon, established in 1886 as an arm of the Evangelical Missionary Society of the Basel Mission in Switzerland. It maintains the spiritual and theological continuity of that church (PCC Constitution). The name was changed from Basel Mission, to The Presbyterian Church in 1957, when the
church gained its independence from the Basel Mission. Its official statistics of 2004 claim about 500,000 members in 1,290 Congregations (Dah 2003; Nyansako-Ni-Nku 1990; PCC church diary 2004). It is the biggest Anglophone church in Cameroon and it should not be confused with its Francophone sister church, the Eglise Presbytérienne Camerounaise (EPC). Each is independent of the other in administration and organization. What unites them is their membership in Federation des Eglises et des Missions Evangeliques du Cameroun (FEMEC), brought into existence by the government, which preferred to deal with one body, rather than with many. The Roman Catholic Church, the largest Cameroonian Christian group that embraces Francophones and Anglophones, was introduced into the country in 1890, much later than the other mainline churches (the Baptists in 1844 and Presbyterian in 1884). Reports from Catholic Information Service Buea reveal that about 32 percent of the country’s estimated 16.5 million people identify with this church. It is truly a national church. Other churches tend to be regional: the PCC is an Anglophone church; the EPC is centered among the Bulus around Yaounde; the Union des Eglise Baptistes Camerounaise (another Francophone group) around the Littoral province; and the Lutheran Church around the Adamawa province. The Roman Catholic Church in Cameroon is divided into five ecclesiastical provinces (Bamenda, Yaounde, Douala, Garoua and Bertoua), with twenty-three dioceses.

Unlike Latin America, where states have persecuted priests for advocating social justice, the Biya government has dealt cautiously with religious leaders, no matter how strongly they have criticized his administration. Since the mid-1990s, unidentified people have murdered some Roman Catholic priests and nuns, and the perpetrators have often been suspected to be the members of government hit-squads, but the government has always allayed these suspicions. No evidence has linked the government to any of the killings. The government is aware of religious leaders’ influence on their believers and would not risk open persecution; moreover, most of those in power, including Biya (who dropped out of a Catholic Seminary) and his Prime Minister (an active member of the PCC and once a congregation elder), belong to one of these churches and would want to avoid confronting their spiritual leaders in public. The government prefers to adopt a press war to defend its positions. Also, unlike in Latin America, where the Pope confronted his priests for over preaching liberation theology at the expense of the growth of the church in the region, there has been no evidence of him doing this in Cameroon probably, because a great majority of Cameroonians seems to support the priests.

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Pentecostalism has had an imprint in Cameroon. Since the 1990s, the country has witnessed the proliferation of Pentecostal groups, especially in the English speaking provinces. Many started as spillovers from Nigeria. The economic crisis that Cameroon has been experiencing since then accounts for this proliferation (Akoko 2002). With the unemployment being high many people join Pentecostal groups to be employed; others, who cannot afford high medical charges and are threatened or infected with the virus that causes AIDS, join for spiritual healing, which Pentecostal ministers claim they can provide. Before the economic crisis, Cameroon had just two small Pentecostal churches, Full Gospel Mission and Apostolic Church, but it now has numerous groups. A survey carried out in 2004 by the Anthropology students of the University of Buea found that since 1992, more than eighty such have established themselves in Buea and neighbouring villages. Membership in some of them is small. The Pentecostal churches in Cameroon, unlike others in Africa (including Nigeria where most of them have their origin) that have played an important role in opposing political reforms by supporting undemocratic regimes or stood firmly against them, have maintained a neutral political and social stance. Unlike the mainline churches, the Pentecostal churches have had only peripheral influence. This is because their leaders, like those in Latin America, believe and teach that churches should primarily be preoccupied with a spiritual agenda, such as prayer, Bible study, preparation for the sacrament, evangelization, and individual pastoral counseling. Each group, as a body, involves itself in politics only in defense of its official teaching and interest. Individual members are not barred from political issues, but they do not involve themselves actively. They may not belong to and campaign for political parties, and may not form political parties or take part in political demonstrations; they may, however register and vote.

In some Africa countries, Pentecostal groups have often engaged in politics by supporting the regime in place; in other countries, they have been on the side of the opposition political groups. For instance, while the mainline churches in Kenya fully supported the opposition parties, which pressed for democratic reforms during the 1980s, the Pentecostal groups supported the Arap Moi’s regime. They received access to the state-controlled media, and they continually portray Moi as a God-fearing leader, guided by principles of peace, love and unity. Moi was under intense external and internal pressure to democratize the country, but the leader of the Redeemed Gospel Church, in one of his televised sermons in February 1992, alleged that Kenya had been like heaven for years under Moi’s leadership. He opined that Moi had been appointed by God to lead the country, and Kenyans ought to be grateful for the peace prevailing. He lambasted the mainline churches for pressing for sociopolitical reforms and termed their leaders rebels, who preached their own gospel, not that of Christ. In
Nigeria, Pentecostals render more support to the opposition groups. Before the last presidential elections of 2003, the chairman of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Lagos State branch, revealed that the Pentecostals had registered all over the nation, and were mobilized to cast their votes for any resourceful and credible candidate who could alleviate the sufferings of the masses and take care of the yearnings of the Pentecostal churches in the country. He claimed that Pentecostals Christians had suffered undue hardships, as each successive government had marginalized them. As a consequence they were now prepared for constructive negotiation with political parties and contestants to enable their members to hold elective and political offices and thereby benefit in the distribution of the national resources. As a sign of disgust with the incumbent regime, and to demonstrate their interest in politics, Pastor Kris Okotie-former pop music star, now the founder and leader of the Pentecostal “Household of God Church,” ran for president, claiming that God had asked him to do so. He started by joining the National Democratic Party, but when he lost that party’s presidential nomination, he joined the Justice Party, which immediately offered him its presidential, but he garnered just 0.3 percent of all votes cast.

Pentecostalism in Kenya and Nigeria is older, more established, and more influential than in Cameroon. The Apostolic Church, the first Pentecostal group in Cameroon, was introduced from Nigeria in 1948, followed by the Full Gospel Mission in 1961. These groups, the lone Pentecostal churches in Cameroon until the early 1990s, had few followers (Akoko 2002). Though Pentecostalism is growing fast in Cameroon, it has neither enough members significantly to influence the political scene there, nor an umbrella association like the PFN to speak on behalf of all its groups. Most members are youths, who join for economic gains; very few are adults who, by virtue of experience and interest, could have political ambitions. If Cameroonians Pentecostalism keeps growing, it could begin to exert political force and speak out on social justice, as have its counterparts in Kenya and Nigeria. An umbrella association to function like the PRN would probably come into being.

The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and the democratic process

In an interview with the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) popular program, “Cameroon calling”, on Sunday, 18 May 2003, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, the Reverend Nyansako-Ni-Nku, echoed what his predecessor, the Reverend Awasum, had written in the preface of a book, that he had edited in 1993, on the role of the PCC in democratic struggles in Cameroon. Awasum had dismissed arguments that the church should stay out of

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4 See the Nigerian Guardian Friday, 10 January 2003.
politics, and he lambasted politicians who threatened to ban or outlaw the church because the church dared make its voice heard. He had argued that politics is about organization and running of a society, and the church is the backbone of any society. He had stated that the PCC in every society tries to perform a role assigned to it as God’s agent of change in every society and that the church cannot stay aloof from legitimate efforts to determine the destiny of the nation of which it is part: It must not ignore blatant injustices, discrimination, deceit, oppression, turmoil, greed, selfishness, nepotism, rancor, mistrust, political jingoism, disunity and institutionalized corruption-practices that do not comply with the gospel of love as enunciated by Jesus Christ, but have become common in Cameroon. No religion, he argued, let alone the PCC, would condone these ills in any society.

Awasum was making this declaration at a time when Cameroonians were clamoring for a multiparty system of governance. The clamor was not unconnected with the “wind of change” propelled by Perestroika and Glasnost, which led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and ended the cold war. Taking a cue from other African countries, Cameroonians noted the fall of dictators and one-party regimes through early presidential, legislative and local elections, sovereign national conferences, national debates or consultations, strikes, and mass demonstrations of nonviolent disobedience.

Though Cameroon was a one-party state, it was de jure a multi-party state. Exploiting this portion of the constitution, Yondo Mandengue Black gathered some Cameroonians in the 1990 to discuss the formation of a political party. The result was the National Coordination for Democracy and Multi-party System (NCDM), whose existence violated the passed in 1967 –but article 3 of the constitution provided for multi-party politics. In February 1990, before the group could achieve its objective, agents of the security police arrested ten of its members and charged them with holding clandestine meetings, inciting revolt, abusing the president, and producing and distributing pamphlets hostile to the regime, all in broad violation of the Law of Association. The defendants were tried in a special military tribunal in Yaounde: three were found guilty and given prison sentences, two were given suspended sentences, and the rest were acquitted. There was much national and international condemnation of the trial. An Amnesty International report on Cameroon in 1990 described it as:

A mockery and abuse of the judiciary process in order to provide some legal basis for the government’s determination to punish supporters of multi-party system (Amnesty International Report on Human Rights Abuse in Cameroon 1990).

The government argued that the defendants had not been tried for attempting to form a political party (Takougang and Krieger 1998; Ngoh, V. 2004). In response to this argument, John Fru Ndi, an Anglophone, filed an application for the
creation of a political party, to be called the Social democratic Front (SDF). In April 1990, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) organized protest marches in major cities against multi-party politics. The marchers included top government officials, such as provincial governors, ministers, divisional officers and general managers of the various state Corporations. These officials, who feared loosing their privileged positions in the event of the introduction of multi-party politics, carried one common message—“No” to multi-party politics and imported democratic models. Having fulfilled all the legal administrative requirements and procedures, Fru Ndi scheduled the launching of his party for 26 May 1990 in Bamenda. The local administrator, working under orders from Yaounde, banned the launch. Despite the presence of about 2000 troops, stationed throughout the town, to deter the population from coming out, between 30,000-40,000 supporters and sympathizers defied the ban and launched the party at the Ntarinkon Park, a neighborhood where the security people did not expect the launch to take place. As the crowd was retiring, agents of the security forces killed six young adults. The government, instructed its journalist of the state media—the Cameroon Radio and Television Corporation and the Cameroon Tribune—to inform the world that the victims had died in a stampede (Mbu, A. 1993; Mezam Division CPDM section protest letter to Biya 1990).

The killing of unarmed marchers drew condemnation—from Cameroonian religious groups, human rights groups, proponents of democracy, the Cameroon Bar Association, university students and staffs, and prominent elderly statesmen, including John Ngu Foncha and Solomon Tandeng Muna (Anglophones, who led the Anglophones into the union with Francophones in Cameroon in 1961). Cameroonians abroad, especially in the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany demonstrated in front of their embassies and called for genuine democracy in their country. Feeling pressure from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France (the traditional ally of the regime), and other countries, and recognizing that the political and social situation of the country had deteriorated, Biya agreed to allow multi-party politics. Even then, the Commonwealth, in which Cameroon had applied for membership, continued to insist on the respect for human rights, democratization and good governance in Cameroon, as outlined in the 1991 Harare declaration, before the country could be admitted into the organization. Cameroon was admitted into the Commonwealth in 1995, though observers of the local politics and opposition forces felt this move was unjustified because of the lapses in its democratization.

Though the PCC believes that it should speak out on political issues, its position is that it should do so without bias to any political party or give allegiance to any emerging or existing political party. In a pastoral letter issued by the Synod Committee of the church on 20 March 1991 (a letter entitled “The
Position of the PCC on Multi-party Politics,” which was read to all its congregations), the church stated that democracy thrives best in a society that is politically pluralistic and where governments are the outcome of free and fair elections. The letter encouraged Cameroonian Christians, and particularly lay Presbyterians, to join the political struggle. The committee, barred its pastors from indulging in partisan politics at all levels: it argued that, with the advent of multiple parties in Cameroon, the congregations would consist of a cross section of political parties, with varying political views, and the pastor has a divine responsibility to be a reconciling factor, because politics tends to breed hatred and confusion; however, a pastor has the right to perform his civic obligation of voting, and he should encourage his parishioners to perform their civic duties too by voting for any party of their choice in a free and fair election. A pastor who decided to engage in politics would be required to resign from his pastoral duties, and his political view would not be expected to be interpreted as that of the PCC. He would remain a member of the PCC, if he so desired, and would receive pastoral care from it.

Release of this letter came in the wake of the popular demand for multi-party politics. At that time and in the context, it became necessary for the church to take an official position on the prevailing political and social discourse, and to provide firm counseling to its pastors on the struggle. To make its position clear on political issues when the need arises, the PCC has issued pastoral letters, (read in all its congregations), memos, (presented to political leaders), and sermons. Unlike political parties, it adopts just these methods, and it does not mobilize its members against any particular party. As a group, whose members hold diverse political views, it has adopted these methods because it believes they can help bring change peacefully.

Biya embarked on a nationwide tour during the turbulent period preceding his declaration of multiparty political system for Cameroon. On 27 September 1991, he visited Buea, the capital of South West province, an Anglophone area. Among the officials whom he met was the Synod Clerk of the PCC, who led a delegation of PCC officials to present to him a memo and a copy of the pastoral letter of 20 March 1991. The memo highlighted many pertinent political issues, and decried corruption, tribalism, sectionalism and nepotism—vices that, it argued, had been firmly institutionalized in Cameroon. It expressed worry that though Cameroon was a bilingual country, French dominated in all official domains of communication, to the detriment of English language and its users. (About 80 percent or more of the programs on CRTV are in the French). The memo thanked the president for creating in Buea a University, which had always been the desire of the Anglophones, and prayed that the graduates of the University should not be subjected to the same discrimination that many Anglophones had faced. The
This memo revealed that the PCC was deeply concerned with the anglophone problem. It was the most vocal church in Cameroon on this issue. The Anglophone problem revolves around the continuous marginalization of the Anglophone minority (about 22 percent of the country’s population) by the Francophone majority. This marginalization has gradually created an anglophone consciousness: the feeling of being recolonized and marginalized in all spheres of public life. It has produced various anglophone associations and pressure groups, which have developed strategies to fight francophone domination. Some associations—for instance, the Southern Cameroons National Council, the Free West Cameroon Movement, and the Ambazonian Movement—go to the extent of advocating outright succession from a government run by Francophones.

In a sermon given on 7 November 1993, the Moderator of the church intimated that Anglophone Cameroonians are a dispossessed minority in a union that they contracted with French-speaking Cameroonians. He called on Anglophones to rebut Cameroonians who want them to believe that because they are few, they are inferior. The church has always provided assistance to any course dealing with the anglophone problem. In 1994, it provided shelter to the second All Anglophone Conference (AAC) in Bamenda because the conference could not be held elsewhere for fear of police brutality. The first AAC, convened by four prominent Anglophones (Munzu Simon, Ekotang Elad, Anyangwe Calson and Itoe Benjamin), had taken place in Buea in 1993. These men were the Anglophones whom Biya had appointed as members of a committee he had created to draft a new constitution. The aim of the conference was to adopt a common Anglophone stand on constitutional matters relating to the welfare of the Anglophones, a stand that was to be presented to the meeting of the technical committee. The conference was attended by Anglophone personalities of all political leanings, and its major resolution was the return to a federal system of government as the best solution to the Anglophone problem, but the Francophones have continued to object it. The government resisted the convening of the second AAC in Bamenda because it feared that, after the futile attempt at returning to a federal system, it could resolve to fight for Anglophone secession.

On 6 October 1993, regarding the General Certificate of Education (GCE) stalemate of 1993, the PCC presented to the Prime Minister a sharply worded memo, in which it condemned the way the Minister of National education was

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5 For more on the Anglophone problem in Cameroon, see Konings 2003a; Konings and Nyamnjoh. 1997.
handling the matter, in effect to destroy the most cherished Anglophone certificate examination. It supported the creation of a GCE board independent enough to parry the threat against Anglophone educational system. On successive occasions, francophone Ministers of National Education had attempted to reform the examination to make it similar to the Baccalaureate, francophone certificate. The first attempt, which failed because of resistance from Anglophone students, had dated back to 1983. Anglophone students interpreted the proposed reforms as a subtle attempt by a Francophone-dominated state to assimilate the anglophone educational system. In that period, many irregularities in managing the examination emanated from the Ministry of National Education-, which raised concerns about the credibility of the examination, and the certificates issued. Some of the irregularities included examination leakages, the poor wording of questions, typographical and grammatical errors, no respect for examination timetable, the late arrival of examination materials to some centers, and low-quality material used for certificates. The government resisted the creation of this board, but after much pressure from Anglophones of all political leanings and from pressure groups such as the Confederation of Anglophone Parent-Teachers’ Association of Cameroon, the Teachers’ Association of Cameroon, and the Cameroon Anglophone Students’ Association, which were all formed for this purpose, it was forced to create one in 1993. This was an important victory for the Anglophones in their struggle against the government’s determination to destroy the GCE (Nyamnjoh 1996). When the board was created without the text of application, the PCC sent another memo to the Prime Minister, thanking the government but urging it to sign the text of application as the last step towards the board’s establishment.  

6  The government signed this text, and the board, managed by Anglophone officials with headquarters in Buea, effectively came into existence in 1994.

In “Justice and Peace,” a keynote address delivered by the Moderator of the church during a seminar of church leaders of FEMEC, in June 2000, the Moderator of the PCC argued that peace is not just the absence of war, but also the presence of justice. He attributed civil strife, which has engulfed most societies, to blatant social injustice, exemplified by tribalism and benign neglect of minorities, and argued that these ills cannot be allowed to continue unchallenged. Anyone versed with the anglophone problem in Cameroon will understand that as usual, such a position is directed towards the support of the course because it exposes what the Anglophones have been accusing each successive Francophone-dominated administration of doing.

In the heat of the political crisis of 1991, when Cameroonians demonstrated in favor of a plural political system, Biya tried to defuse the situation by calling a

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6 For more on the GCE crisis, see Nyamnjoh 1996.
meeting of opinion leaders from around the whole country. The conference, popularly known as the Tripartite, was aimed at working out an electoral code for a Cameroon multi-party structure. It brought together government ministers, heads of many political parties, academics, business people, and church leaders. It was held in Yaounde in October 1991, and amongst those invited was the moderator of the PCC. In a paper presented at the conference, he started by expressing worry over the lack of peace, safety, and love in the country. He blamed the government, opposition parties and nonpoliticians alike—people who talk peace, but indulge in selfish actions that hamper the peace. He condemned the wanton killings of peaceful demonstrators by the forces of law and order, and prayed that the atmosphere during the discussion should be frank, and that the government and the opposition should adopt a give-and-take attitude. The joined the opposition parties in advocating the creation of an independent electoral commission, if free and fair elections were to be expected. He argued that an independent electoral commission, functioning under a well-drawn electoral code, would boost efforts to bring peaceful coexistence among Cameroonians.

In December 1991, President Biya announced legislative elections for 1 March 1992. The timing of the elections generated controversy. Many political parties and a cross section of Cameroonians felt that a more acceptable election code ought to have been drawn up before the elections. Many thought the time given for the necessary formalities to be fulfilled by the participating parties was inadequate. Many groups and independent leaders appealed, requesting Biya to reconsider the date and extend the time; however, he did not heed these calls and the elections were held as scheduled. Many political parties boycotted the elections. The PCC was among the groups that expressed much worry about elections. It faxed a message to president Biya, appealing for a postponement of the elections to avert a political uprising. Amongst the reasons it advanced for the postponement of the elections were that there was yet no generally acceptable electoral code, the time was so short for political parties, even the CPDM party, to prepare efficiently for the elections, and the number of political parties participating was less than those abstaining—which made it unhealthy for the desired peaceful evolution of the country.

On 25 August 1992, after these elections, Biya announced that a precipitated presidential election would occur on 11 October of that year. This election was obviously more important, and despite protests against the electoral code, a majority of the parties decided to join in the race, either as independent parties, or aligning with bigger parties to present a single candidate. Six candidates, including the incumbent, entered the race. The campaign was nasty and bitter, and it tore Cameroonians apart. In a pastoral letter “Your Christian Conscience and the Presidential Election,” the PCC formalized its response. The Church
leaders expressed worry that the election would take place without an electoral code that was acceptable to all political parties involved, and they wondered whether six weeks was enough time to set the electoral machinery in place. They expressed concern on the controversial issue of the constitution, and argued that Cameroonians deserved the right to determine what form of government they wanted and what kind of presidency they needed. Since everybody was already prepared for the election despite these shortcomings, the church leaders advised Cameroonians to use their ballot responsibly: they urged everyone to vote for the candidate believed to have the qualities of leadership as outlined in the Bible. They urged those who had been charged with the responsibility of organizing the election to ensure that voting would be free and fair, so that at the end, the winner could win magnanimously and the losers lose graciously. They appealed to all the political parties to abide by a civilized code of conduct by ensuring that nobody would exploit the situation to cause violence or interfered with anybody’s rights.

This election was one of the most controversial in the history of Cameroon. An openly skeptical but complaint Supreme Court declared Biya (the CPDM candidate) winner by 39 percent, followed by Fru Ndi (the SDF candidate) with 36 percent, but it was widely believed that John Fru Ndi had received more votes. The irregularities were so glaring that the Washington-based National Democratic Institute, which had observed the election, reported that the electoral process made it impossible to determine which candidate would have been the winner in a fair election: “The election was designed to fail and while several parties were responsible for election irregularities, the overwhelming weight of responsibility for the failed process lies with the government and President Paul Biya.” The report concluded that like the March legislative election, that election would continue to block, rather than resolve, Cameroon’s democratization struggles (Fombad and Fonyam 2004; Takougang and Krieger 1998). The results were rejected by the SDF, which immediately declared its candidate the winner. General dissatisfaction with the official results led to rioting and destruction of the property of CPDM stalwarts in many parts of the country. This response was so serious in the North West Province that the government imposed a three-month state of emergency, during which that had been sent there violently suppressed protests and committed several human-rights violations. Fru Ndi was placed under house arrest in his Bamenda residence. Western governments, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, imposed sanctions against the Biya regime.

The socio-political atmosphere in Cameroon after these elections was so tense that in March 1993, the Synod Committee of the church met to address current issues. The committee lamented the continuously deteriorating state of the
national economy, which had pushed a majority of Cameroonians into misery and poverty, while a few lived in opulence. It attributed the problem to the lack of transparency in the state machinery, which had accelerated poor accountability, embezzlement and capital flight. It appealed to the government to cut funding across the board so that the cost of goods and services could be reduced. It lamented the insecurity in the country, and urged the government to improve the state of security. It recalled the last presidential election, which, it argued, had left Cameroonians more divided than united. It expressed worry that the political stalemate, if it went unchecked, could lead to a dangerous polarization. It called on President Biya to announce a realistic timetable for addressing issues of dialogue, reconciliation and justice. It advocated the establishment of an independent judiciary, new media, and national electoral codes. It reviewed the situation of human rights, and took note of arbitrary arrest, obstruction, and shooting of peaceful demonstrators, detentions without trial, beatings, and torture. It expressed distress that those who had violated the laws the most were those who had been expected to uphold it, and urged the government and people to take appropriate steps to reverse this human-rights record so that the dignity of the individuals could be upheld and the life and property of every citizen could be protected.

The government and some of its supporters have always interpreted the PCC’s criticisms of the democratic process as siding with the opposition political forces. Despite this, the church, has so far not felt repercussions from progovernment dissident groups. The economic crisis probably accounts for this: Most people blame the crisis on governmental economic mismanagement and the political stalemate that stems from the government’s reluctance to introduce genuine democratic reforms (Jua 1991; Konings 1996). The church has been addressing these issues with the support of a vast majority of Cameroonians, and the pressure it continuous places on the government for a solution to the anglophone problem gives it strong support.

The Roman Catholic Church and the democratic process

Before the abrogation of the 1962 antisubversion decree, the prelates of the Roman Catholic Church were among the few citizens who publicly criticized the state. The Ndongmo affair was the first remarkable criticism by any Christian leader in the history of the country. Like their counterparts in the PCC, they have addressed many sociopolitical issues through sermons, press interviews, and letters signed by the bishops of the country or an ecclesiastical province. National

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7 For a comprehensive analysis of the causes of the economic crisis in Cameroon, see Jua 1991; Konings 1996.
Episcopal or ecclesiastical province conferences are frequently held, and each focuses on a topic—such as corruption, economic crisis, tribalism, justice, peace, good governance—that affects Cameroonians. At the end of every meeting, the position of the RCC or the ecclesiastic province is released. For instance, in 1977, the bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Bamenda issued a release on “corruption”; in 1980, those of Garoua also did so; in 2000, the national Episcopal meeting dwelt on the same theme, at the end of which the bishops issued a release. In 1990, the national Episcopal conference issued a letter on the economic crisis. In 1996, the conference issued a letter on tribalism, which the bishops believed to be increasing. In 1997, they issued a letter on justice and peace. In 1998, they released a letter on good governance because, like the PCC, the RCC believed that the political and economic stalemates in the country had resulted from bad governance. In 2003, their release was on the electoral process. In addition to these announcements, individual prelates, particularly the Anglophones (probably because of their sensitivity to the marginalization of the Anglophones), have often voiced their concern on such issues. In all these cases, the prelates have espoused various aspects of liberation theology, which call for the church to combine preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments with a deep commitment to social justice. They argue that the Bible should be read from the perspective of the masses, and sin should be understood, not only in personal, but also in institutional terms. Unjust political and social structures are as sinful as personally failing to observe a biblical commandment. The church, they argue in an episcopal letter of 17 May 1990, must announce in word and action an integral form of salvation, or liberation, from all manifestations of sin, and not merely offer individuals the means of personal salvation through the sacraments.

In the Episcopal letter of January 1988, the prelates argued that political involvement is a biblical obligation for every Christian. In espousing such a theology before the parliamentary elections of that year, they appealed to Christians to vote. They held that when Christians vote in compliance with the gospel, the right people—the ones capable of eradicating social ills—are voted to power. Corruption is eating deep into the fabric of the Cameroonian society, and this is one of the ills that the bishops, like the PCC leaders, have on several occasions addressed. The rate of corruption in the country has been documented in journals and local newspapers and confirmed by Transparency International, a German nongovernmental organization, which monitors levels of corruption around the world. Twice, in 1998 and in 1999, this organization rated Cameroon
as the most corrupt of ninety-nine countries surveyed. When the reputation of the country on corruption was exposed to the international community, the Biya administration, which is often accused of being at the center of it, decided to create an anticorruption commission, headed by the country’s Prime Minister, to fight corruption in all ministerial departments. Biya himself has on several occasions through his speeches made a solemn pledge to eradicate corruption, but analysts believe that these measures are a smokescreen to please international financial donors, who have often insisted on its eradication as a precondition for giving assistance, and to lure foreign investors. Many top civil servants, members of Biya’s ethnic group (the Beti), and CPDM militants have often been involved in corrupt practices, and nothing is done to them because they are close to Biya, giving credence to the argument that there is official complicity in the act. The pledges made to eradicate corruption are hardly translated into concrete actions, as the practice persists. For instance, when any new minister of finance is appointed, he pledges to eradicate the notorious 30-percent kickbacks that treasury officials demand from contractors before settling their bills. More often than not, the minister’s fight against the 30 percent consists of making public statements that instructions have been handed down to treasury officials to stop collecting these kickbacks. In its editorial on this issue, the post of 3 June 2005 argues that the fact that this pledge is always made indicates that the practice is more or less institutionalized. Incongruously, the paper argues that “after all, in Cameroon, a good promise is one that has not been kept and so the ‘30%’ continues to live”. The paper argues that the 30 percent precision is rather suspicious. It asks why 30 percent? It could have been 25 percent, or even 35 percent. But it is always 30 percent. “The “30%” decision must have come from very high quarters; from people who have records of all bills that are being settled by the state treasury all over the country” (post 3 June 3, 2005).

The Roman Catholic Church has addressed corruption on several occasions. In 1977, the Bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Bamenda first expressed concern over it: They issued a letter intended to draw attention to it. Three years after, those of Garoua did it. In the two letters, the Bishops linked corruption in the country to official complicity. In September 2000, the Bishops of the country issued a letter arguing that the economic problems facing the country were compounded by the dishonesty of corrupt government officials, who, in connivance with domestic or foreign interests, were diverting national resources for their own profit and transferring public funds to private accounts in foreign banks.

See the Transparency International report for these years. The report for the following year ranked Cameroon second, and the subsequent one ranked it seventh. Despite the improvement, this ranking does not auger well for the country and those in authority.
Another area that has worried the Bishops and on which they have taken a stance is the country’s economy. On 17 May 1990, they issued “The economic crisis which the Country is undergoing,” a pastoral letter presenting the crisis as an evil stemming from every person’s sin, characterized by hatred—hatred that destroys families, divides villages and cities, and set ethnic groups at odds with each other, resulting in tribalism and a lack of solidarity. The bishops saw embezzlement, corruption, lack of civic responsibility, and capital flight—all of which have been argued to be the root causes of the crisis—as the results of the hatred that Cameroonians felt towards their country. The bishops argued that this hatred had been aggravated by authorities who cared little for the common good and had made democracy a mere slogan. They accused the authorities of stifling democracy in the country through censorship. In apparent reference to Biya’s associates and the ruling CPDM party, they affirmed that no social group has the right to assume the role of single guide in any society, because that breeds discontent in other groups. This document, praised by the privately owned media and the opposition, was criticized lengthily over the CRTV and in the Cameroon Tribune, whose journalists, with the government’s connivance, expressed indignation that the bishops were addressing matters that were not their concern.

In their Episcopal letters of 1997, on “Justice and Peace” and that of 1998, on “Good Governance,” the bishops raised the issues of the concentration of executive power and the lack of judiciary independence. Critics of the political system in Cameroon argue that too much power is concentrated in the hands of the executive, weakening the administration, the legislature and the judiciary; they argue that these arms of government function improperly because the executive intervenes too frequently. The bishops argued that a nonindependent judicial system cannot fight corruption, especially corruption involving highly placed officials. They advocated a judicial system that can function freely without the intervention from the executive, and asked the state to take great care of the moral integrity of those who administer justice. With persistent elections malpractices in the country since the institution of multiparty democracy, the bishops, in their 2003 conference, called for a complete overhaul of the electoral process. They stated that the church stood for an independent electoral commission, in which all political parties would participate freely and fairly. They expressed concern that Cameroon has no such structure. In an interview with the Post, the president of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, Bishop Cornelius Esua (an Anglophone) argued that Cameroon could not claim to have an independent electoral commission when the divisional officers and provincial governors were those who would organize elections. The Bishop

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9 For more on electoral malpractices, see Nyamnjoh 2002.
lambasted the National Election Observatory, and argued that it must serve the interests of ruling regime.

In the same conference, the bishops expressed concern over the manner in which the government was managing the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Funds, which Cameroon is a beneficiary. For want of transparency, they called on the government to involve the church in the managing this fund, and in accordance with the principles of the fund, they asked the government to fully involve the civil society in implementing projects from the fund. The bishops made this call amid allegations that top government officials were embezzling money from the fund.

The most outspoken anglophone bishops on issues of public concern have been Paul Verdzekov (Archbishop of Bamenda) and Christian Cardinal Tumi (Archbishop of Douala). In 1992, while the state of emergency was being enforced in the North West province and as soon as Che Ngwa Ghandi, a civilian, had been tortured to death in police custody, Verdzekov issued a pastoral letter denouncing the torturers, and a few days later repeated his charges on Radio France Internationale. For this outspokenness, the state accused him of supporting the SDF party.

Because Cardinal Tumi ranked at the top of the hierarchy of the church and was the only cardinal in the country, his comments on public issues receive much publicity. Considered the moral authority, he has never relented in speaking out on public issues. When other countries were holding national conferences, chaired in most cases by Catholic bishops, expectation was high that Cameroon would have such a conference, and it was believed that Cardinal Tumi would chair it. In Yaounde in June 1990 he gave a press conference in which he answered questions on a wide range of public issues. In Jeune Afrique Economie in the same year, he gave a celebrated interview, in which he again addressed a wide range of public issues. Three years later, he did it for The Herald newspaper (October 31-2 and November, 1994). Before the Presidential election of October 1992, he issued a pastoral letter, “To all Christians and Men of Good Will,” in which he highlighted the obligations of a Christian toward elections. In October 1994, he was summoned to the presidential palace for an hour’s meeting with President Paul Biya. This was the first item on TV news that evening, and was the main headline of most newspapers the following day.

10 Cameroon applied for and was granted the status of a heavily indebted poor country. For more on the program in Cameroon, see Tamba 2001.
11 The Social Democratic Front, no doubt the strongest opposition party in Cameroon, is popularly believed to have been the winner of the presidential election of 1992, in which official sources declared Paul Biya the winner.
12 See, for example, Gifford 1995.
In 2000, when the government stationed military personnel (known as Commandement operationnel) in Douala to fight a local crime wave, there were persistent allegations that these forces were arresting and torturing to death many innocent people. After the BBC, Radio France Internationale, and other international media had persistently reported on the discovery of mass graves where such people had been buried, Cardinal Tumi wrote to the Governor of the Littoral province and denounced the killings. He soon gave another celebrated interview to *Jeune Afrique Economie*, one in which he again addressed the killings and discussed other national problems. In response to this interview and in defense of the government, the minister of the interior published an open letter to him, a letter in which he accused the prelate of lying, being antipatriotic, wanting to stand for presidential election, supporting thieves and armed robbers, violating the principle of the separation of the state and the church, having little respect for those who govern Cameroon, questioning the electoral process, not being humble, being tribalistic, and so on. In response, the cardinal published an open letter, in which he defended himself against all the accusations and he then published an open letter to thieves and highway robbers of Douala to counter rumor that he was supporting them.

It is obvious from these statements, interviews, sermons, press releases, and pastoral letters that in the past decade, these churches have, increased their involvement in politics. In addition to being guided by their pastoral mission of spreading the gospel, they have adopted the precepts of liberation. They have therefore come into conflict with a government that is apparently unwilling to introduce genuine democratic reform. The PCC, in particular, has been articulating the concerns of the Anglophone community, largely because, contrary to the RCC, it is a church managed entirely by the Anglophones, and therefore its leaders articulate the preoccupations of the members. Though the RCC is national in character, it is unrealistic, given the history of Cameroon, for the bishops to speak in unison on national political issues. Unlike the PCC clergies, who speak in unison on any political action, some bishops in Cameroon may as individuals identify with their regional interest.

The bishops of Biya’s Beti ethnic group are regarded as sympathetic to the regime because of their ethnic affiliation. One attended minor seminary with Biya, but all have links of patronage with him. For instance, when he was proclaimed the winner of the 2004 presidential election (an election marred with irregularities in favour of Biya), Cardinal Tumi quickly declared in an interview with Radio Equinox (a private radio station in Douala) that the election was not free and fair, but the Archbishop of Yaounde, Victor Tonye Bakot, then president of the Cameroon Episcopal Conference, immediately used the national
radio station to contradict him by claiming that the result reflected Cameroonians’ aspirations. None of these prelates claimed to have spoken on behalf of the church. Archbishop Bakot’s position, no doubt, reflected his regional interest; moreover, he preferred the national radio-which is frequently used by the regime to project Biya as the best leader-to make his point because he was sure of the publicity the journalists of this station would make of it. The late Archbishop of Yaounde, Jean Zoa, also of the Beti ethnic group, was considered sympathetic with the regime, but had established some independence. (He collapsed and died of a heart problem while officiating at the funeral of another bishop in the Yaounde Cathedral on 20 March 1998.) In April 1990, while CPDM militants were protesting the call by the opposition forces for the introduction of multiparty politics, he organized in his cathedral a Christian worship service aimed at dissuading Cameroonians from supporting multiparty politics. During the service, he blasted the call for multiparty politics, and accused its advocates as people who wanted to “destabilize” the peace under Biya’s leadership. When six people were shot in Bamenda during the launching of the SDF party, Archbishop Verdzekov organized a memorial service in the Bamenda Cathedral in honor of these people. Zoa reacted by organizing in Yaounde a counter service, which, he argued, was to “cleanse the image of the Catholic church from the unholy service”, organized by his colleague in Bamenda. In 1996, Zoa started denouncing the regime he had been supporting. In sermons in Yaounde (for instance, 10 October 1996 and 24 August 1997) and in the media, he blamed the regime for indulging in corruption, being unwilling to democratize the political scene, and causing economic hardship and social insecurity (The Herald August 25-27, 1997; CAMNET archives May, 2005).

Both the PCC and RCC are making their positions known on important issues of concern to Cameroonians, and they are using liberation theology as a strategy to foster social justice. In Latin America, unlike in Cameroon, liberation theology was associated with the officials of the Roman Catholic Church only—people committed to the liberation of their people even without the Vatican’s approval (Gutierrez 1977). Unlike in Latin America, it would seem though the Roman Catholic priests in Cameroon may be interested in liberating Cameroonians, they would want to do so in the pace dictated by the Vatican. For instance, it was rumored that Cardinal Christian Tumi was to present his candidature for the presidential election of 2004. Many Cameroonians, including newspapers, which carried it as the banner story, welcomed the idea because of his undoubted moral authority, relentless effort in fighting for social justice, and long standing efforts to expose social and governmental ills. But in several interviews, the archbishop made it clear that though he, as a Cameroonian, is eligible to run, as a Roman Catholic priest, he can only do so with the Vatican’s approval (L’effort
Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how the mainline churches in Cameroon—the PCC and the RCC—have played significant roles in ongoing political and social transformations. They have done so through Pastoral Letters, episcopal Conferences, and interviews in church-owned newsletters and the private press. Their criticisms of the managers of state affairs have drawn sharp responses from several government quarters, some of who consider the clergy’s actions unpatriotic. It is therefore unsurprising that relations between the state and these churches have been strained. Like many other agents of civil society in Cameroon, the church is taking advantage of recent political and social liberalization to influence important national issues. This new strength of religion in the political landscape reflects historical and transnational sources that continue to affect local realities, such as the mass media and transcontinental migrations.

The growth and spread of revival movements within churches from Nigeria is widely acknowledged (Akoko 2002). Revival movements almost led to a schism in the RCC, a rift exploited by political elites who interpreted it along the lines of the autochthonity-allochthonity conflict, thereby extending the politics of exclusion from the socioeconomic and political domain to the religious domain (Awasom 2001; Konings 2003b). This result could only have diminished the role of the church in fostering social justice. Mismanagement and a leadership tussle within the RCC and the blatant neglect of the principles of rational management are important drawbacks to such efforts (Gifford 1997: 262). The explicit recognition of geoethnic cleavages within the PCC is equally an important handicap. The PCC constitution clearly states that if the moderator of the church comes from the North West province, the Synod Clerk should come from the South West province and vice versa, thereby recognizing regional cleavages.

Despite these shortcomings, it is clear that actions undertaken by the PCC and the RCC have helped create political and social awareness in Cameroonian (Takougang and Krieger 1998). As long as the government does not engage in reforms designed to improve the lives of Cameroonian, relations between the church and the state may continued to deteriorate. The recent Episcopal letter intended to draw government attention to the poor management of funds meant to alleviate Cameroonian’s economic plight illustrates this tension.