

*Jeunesse Active pour Chantal Biya (JACHABY)/Cercle des Amis du Cameroun (CERAC)  
and Femocracy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cameroon<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract**

This paper critically examines two organisations charged with the mobilisation of support for Chantal Biya, Cameroon's 1<sup>st</sup> lady. Created in 1995 in accordance by Law No. 90/053 of December 19, 1990 by Cameroon's first lady Chantal Biya, it was to promote Cameroon's image. It was also to provide compassionate aid to the deprived and needy, promote education of the woman and girl child and wrestle against suffering and poverty. CERAC like JACHABY have become tools for the veneration and 'worship' of Chantal Biya and "femocracy" in Cameroon's democratic and multiparty experience. This has been through gifts and other forms of mass mobilisation, cheerleading and grandstanding for the ruling party, the Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM). This is a challenge to good democratic practice and ascendancy. The personalisation of governance within a democratic dispensation in Cameroon should be discouraged and democratic values encouraged for good governance in the country. Through a content analysis of internet and secondary sources and observation the study concludes that both JACHABY and CERAC have deviated for their noble mission and now serve as lobby groups for the First Lady and the President of Cameroon.

*Keywords:* Women mobilisation, femocracy, Cameroon

**Contextualising or Delimiting the Debate**

The role of women in politics and governance in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular has remained a subject of intense discussion among scholars and the general public. In Morocco for example, the challenges are in the domain of radical reform and in Uganda there is a clamour for women to become visible in leadership positions in the country. These pressures have an effect on the attitude of Ugandan men and women towards the presence and active participation of women in politics<sup>2</sup> (Tamale 2001; Dalmasso 2008)). Similarly, discussions about citizenship and control of the public space in South Africa have been generally universalised. The argument now is the distinction between the public and private spheres within the South African society. Women's caring roles in the private sphere have limited their level of participation in the public sphere as equal citizens with men<sup>3</sup> (Lister

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<sup>2</sup> Ahikire, <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/firs-lady-syndrome>, accessed: April 18, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Gouws, <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/firs-lady-syndrome>, accessed: April 17, 2011; Pheko, <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/55641>, accessed: April 18, 2011.

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1997, 69), some progress in South Africa notwithstanding. In the preamble of the constitution of Cameroon Article 1 paragraph 2, the equality of all citizens before the law is clearly stated but in paragraph 12 of the country's report to the Human Rights Committee in 1999, the government stated that "the cultural and religious foundation of most African peoples establish a more or less clear-cut hierarchy between men and women" and that Cameroonian society "is no exception (Cameroon 1999).

The consequence is that the state machinery has functioned over the years in a way that women importance has only been trumpeted when used as domestic patronage networks of the national machinery by politicians. In fact, there is little or no commitment among high level government officials about the need to improve the status of women (Adams 2007, 176-197) and their participation in politics and governance in different countries. This view is re-echoed by Mouiche (2007, 391-408) who intimates that the administration of Cameroon has been monopolised by men over time and space to the exclusion of women. He argues that the source of this imbalance was in the colonial period when the colonial administration was male dominated and women were responsible for the domestic and private spaces. Mouiche intimates that women need to be seen and heard in the administration of Cameroon to balance the male/female equation and promote democratic principles and good governance in the country.

Other authors like Raul (2006) argue that the number of women representation in the national assembly has been on the decrease instead of increasing in a more liberalised environment. The percentage of women representation was 14, in 1988, 6 in 1992, 5 in 1997 and 10 in 2002. The fluctuation is an indication that women are still to be fully integrated into the political arena in the country. Raul has also argued that the marginalisation of women in politics in Cameroon is a result of the co-existence of customary and statutory laws, the corrupt political system and fraudulent practices. The irony is however that from the findings of Raul, a majority of the female respondents opine that female political figures are more trustworthy and capable of delivering the goods than their male counterparts. In spite of this, many of them have not succeeded to be voted into the councils and parliament probably because women hate themselves.

Why is it that in spite of the fact that women are considered to be more reliable than men they are more or less invisible within the political structures of Cameroon such as the councils and parliament? While several reasons may be advanced to explain this unfortunate situation, the cultural and religious environment in traditional Cameroon like other African countries have virtually made it a taboo for women to compete with men (Abunaw 1997, 11) and besides, men have often amassed wealth from earlier appointive positions and have often used this to rig or bribe their way through during electoral consultations in Cameroon.<sup>4</sup> Such elections have often been described by the masses as unfair because of several unorthodox methods used by competitors such as the transportation of voters, multiple registrations and voting, ghost ballot boxes, poor establishment of electoral lists and the stuffing of ballot boxes with papers of the incumbents who never lose elections in many African countries. Christian Cardinal Tumi (2006, 80) of the Douala archdiocese contends that since independence "our governing authority has never organised transparent elections in Cameroon, even during the one-party period."

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<sup>4</sup> This is seen in the way they lavishly spend money in buying drinks, rice, sugar and maggi during campaigns for election into parliament and councils.

Women from different walks of life in Cameroon including, politicians, and educationists have observed that the status of women in the political arena in the country is secondary to that of men because of several factors. Rose Abunaw (1997, 11), former parliamentarian of the National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP) representing Manyu Division (former Vice Speaker of the National Assembly and parliamentarian of the ruling Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM), intimated that the level of women participation in politics was very low as there were 27 of them in a National Assembly of 180 members in 1997. She regretted the fact that women were made to remain in sectors such as animation and for those who took interest in vying for positions in parliament; they were discriminated, ridiculed and fought against by men. She argued that this precarious situation of women in the political arena was compounded by the fact that the central committee of the ruling CPDM chose only men to run for elections and not women. Abunaw also intimated that men have made people to believe that politics is a man's world and female politicians once threatened easily give up or are bought over.

There is however lip service today in Cameroon about women active participation in politics. The different political parties trumpet it in their rallies and other meetings but the situation has not changed. Women remain at the background of political activism in Cameroon but not without resistance through socio-professional groups and non-governmental organisations. They have used these groups to create space for liberal expression about the way the country should be governed but concrete results are still far-fetched.

While the political landscape in Cameroon has witnessed some changes in male/female participation in politics and the electoral process, the *status quo* has virtually remained fourteen years after Abunaw made this observation about the role of women in politics in Cameroon. The visibility of women in the political arena in Cameroon is low and a few of those who have braved the odds and ventured into this male dominated space have literally been swallowed up by a crushing male majority or have failed to make a good case on female representation (Forbinake 2011, 12). Another lady politician, Lydia Effimba (1997, 11), leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and Lawong Helen (1996, 6), a parliamentarian from the Bui constituency of the North West Region of Cameroon ably defended the fact that women were second class citizens in the political arena but that they were a more action oriented people than their male counterparts (1995, 6).

Other challenges stirring at Cameroonian women in the face include the fear of insecurity. Women always want security for themselves and their children (Okala 1997, 11) but men are generally egoistic, selfish, self-centredness and love only themselves (Monju 1997, 11), some are bossy (Morfaw 1997, 11), unwilling to implement rights for both men and women (Morfaw 1997, 11). Some of the Cameroonian governing elite have the attitude of not giving women a chance to be managers (Wendi 1997, 11) and above all, many of them exclude women from having access to education, health services, political power and decision making (Beleoken 1996 6). Although efforts are being made to recognise that women are an important force to reckon with in public spaces in Cameroon, the gap between them and men is still very wide. There is still a patriarchal tendency where women are only consulted when there is need to use them for the greater empowerment of men to their own detriment. Men have continued to exhibit those characteristics that make them ever ready to exclude women from positions of influence in the political structures of the country.

The fact that women are in a disadvantaged position in politics and other sectors of national life is not limited to Cameroon but obtains in other African countries in varying degrees.

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Democratic freedoms are occasionally suppressed and a critical mass of the citizens including women are disenfranchised through effective rigging machinery set up by different governments.<sup>5</sup> For a long time there was a paternalistic approach to women's representation and rights in South Africa. Those who were at the forefront of greater women participation in politics and governance encountered considerable obstacles. In many instances, female political candidates are excluded from their parties strong backing through prejudice and the persistence of a self-serving 'old boys club' behind the selection of candidates.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conceptualising the Study**

Femocracy has been defined by Amina Mama (1997,1) as:

An anti-democratic female power structure, which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own.

This definition of Amina Mama describes femocracy as a form of political participation or government where women set up a power structure of their own which serves to create or replicate the same problems of inequality created by men that they sought to fight against.

This study does not limit itself to Mama's definition and observation. It defines femocracy from what is taking place in Cameroon. Femocracy can be defined to mean the ability of married and/or unmarried women holding positions of recognition and influence to mobilise both an educated and a largely uninformed and uneducated number of women using state resources and other instruments of power at their disposal. Their ability to mobilise may also be based on some 'faces behind the mask' who include men of position and who are willing to share political space and prolong their stay in leadership positions in the country. The mass mobilisation of other people is for the purpose of achieving a socio-economic and more importantly a political goal for self aggrandisement and edification. It is also a way of breaking into a male dominated socio-political space as allies or partners or both.

The Cameroonian example shows that in trying to reinforce an existing patriarchal state structure, privileged women have rather promoted the personalisation of power for the First Lady as well as the President of the Republic. Contrary to Tsikata's argument that First Ladies attempts to make themselves role models is a way of saying women can be considered successful only when they are married (Tsikata 1998), in the Cameroonian case, there are several divorced women or single mothers who have fought for women rights and control of the socio-political space in their own right as women and are not married to powerful and influential men in the society.

The visibility of First Ladies in their 'humanitarian' activities has led to what might be aptly described as "First Ladyism" which is a sub strand of femocracy. Many African First Ladies have built careers of their own and support bases which have made them actively involved in politics in their own right and not simply following their husbands as was the case before (Pokam 2006, 1). Their success has been due to the argument that they as women need to be

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<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim, <http://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/expanding-democratic-space-in-nigeria>, accessed: April 16, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Pheko, <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/55641>, accessed: April 18, 2011.

given a chance to prove that they can do better than men. Many of them claim that they are closer to the people and so understand better than anyone else their needs. The fact that the powers of First Ladies in Africa have been systematically augmented through the creation of specific state structures that provide them with independent instruments has been baptised or christened as one of the forms of manifestation of femocracy.<sup>7</sup>

Some of these First Ladies like Nana Agyeman-Rawlings, former First Lady of Ghana developed a very powerful machinery and was described as the President while the husband Ft. Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings was given rather the title of First Gentleman (Sakyi-Addo 1998). This was indeed a reversal of roles in state protocol and proved that the wife of Rawlings was able to use the power of manipulation to influence policy while the husband more or less succumbed to her power of influence. Very recently she was again in the news for trying to take over the leadership of the National Democratic Committee (NDC) but was beaten woefully at the primaries. Among other consequences “First Ladyism” has in some cases led to an increase in the number of female political activists which is a gradual though insignificant step of female invasion of hitherto male dominated spaces. What they will effectively do with these spaces in the future is difficult to say but one thing is that their number is likely to increase with time.

The study of women and feminist activism can be conveniently captured in the concept of femocracy. The political arena for long was the preserve of men and women were only able to play a role through a remote control state mechanism but yet the differences remained glaring between men and women because no separate structures existed for the women. In the African continent as Mama (1997) opines, femocracies emerged out of the commitment of the international community’s move to promote greater gender equality but which was beneficial only to a small female elite. The end result was and remains a reinforcement of patriarchal social systems that these women had initially intended to avoid or discourage. Femocrats otherwise people who defend women participation or leadership in elections and governance argue that it is the right of women to control the affairs of society since their husbands are in positions of influence or control power (Tsikata 1998).

Following the 1992 World Summit for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women in Geneva and the Beijing Conference in 1995, some African First Ladies held a conference in Yaounde Cameroon hosted by Chantal Biya, the First Lady of Cameroon in 1996. This took place at the same time with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) summit that was held in Cameroon that year. Among the First Ladies who attended the first gathering were those of Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, Malawi, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Tanzania. In the communiqué which was incorporated into the official communiqué of the OAU, there emerged the need to develop strategies to improve the lives of rural women (Mama 1997). This gathering of some African First Ladies was a kind of femocracy because as the husbands of First Ladies were deliberating on the way forward for the African continent as men, their wives were doing same as women. If the discussions of African Heads of State were a form of ‘mascocracy,’ the meetings and discussions of the First Ladies were about basic social issues and the improvement of the lot of rural women. It was in fact femocracy, the counterpart of ‘mascocracy.’

### **Birth and Mission of CERAC and JACHABY**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibrahim, <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/first-lady-syndrome>, accessed: April 16, 2011.

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The *Cercle des Amis du Cameroun* (CERAC) was created in 1995 pursuant to Law No. 90/053 of 19 December 1990 by 'Her Excellency' Mrs Chantal Biya, the first lady of Cameroon. It is a humanitarian, apolitical and non-profit making organisation. The main aim of the organisation is to participate actively in the development of Cameroon by providing major assistance to the poorest segments of the society such as the sick and the disadvantaged in society. It is particularly concerned with fighting against suffering and poverty from the poorest social strata of society. Besides, it has since 1995 focused on preventing the risk of mother to child transmission of HIV/AIDS. As an association of women, it also hopes to develop dialogue between generations, provide didactic material for kids in school, encourage agriculture through farm implements, assist victims of disasters, build the capacity of women to raise funds, rehabilitate structures among others<sup>8</sup> (Yufeh 2010, 14; Yufeh 2010, 15; Yufeh 2011, 21; Yufeh 2011, 16; Ndouyou-Mouliom 2011, 16; Essogo 2011, 15; Loh 2011, 15; Loh 2011, 17; Tchakounte 2011, 7). Its other goal is to promote the image of Cameroon to the external world.<sup>9</sup> The generosity of the First Lady received criticisms from Cameroonians living in the United States following the gift of \$6,000.00 to them during a visit to Los Angeles.<sup>10</sup> Many of those who criticised it argued that this money should have been used to develop Cameroon and not give it to Cameroonians who were working abroad and sending remittances home to their family members because of the poor economic situation of the country.

The CERAC is also involved in the support of rural women and health centres in the rural areas with material gifts. These include sewing machines, wheel barrows, bags of fertiliser, diabetic machines, delivery and circumcision sets, bush lamps, hoes, cutlasses, grinding mills, fungicides, seeds among others as they did to the Awing population on 27 February 2011 (Loh 2011, 15). Meanwhile on 28 February 2011, CERAC was again in the news as the organisation donated material to the Mbiyeh Integrated Health Centre in Donga Mantung Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. Among the gifts were beds, mattresses, lamps, wheel barrows, wheel chairs for people with disabilities, foodstuff, corn mills, bags of fertiliser, animal feed, hand carts or trucks and treated mosquito bed nets (Loh 2011, 17). Earlier on 14 February 2011, CERAC had extended its largesse to the women of Lom and Djerem in the East Region with gifts of farm tools which included wheelbarrows, watering cans, bags of fertiliser, hand carts and some seedlings (Yufeh 2011, 21).

In some circles, it is argued that CERAC was founded by former First Lady Jeanne Irene Biya as an association of wives of diplomats posted to Yaounde (*Expression Directe* of the SDF, 18-19 May 2000) but today the association has embraced wives of ministers and other top ranking parastatal organisations in the country. Since April 2003 new members of CERAC include Marie Madeleine Esengue Avoki who became the Chargé des Affaires for the DRC, Rina Louise Pretorius, Chargé des Affaires for the Republic of South Africa, Talya Omer, the wife of the former Israeli ambassador, Isabelle Savaria, wife of the Canadian High

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<sup>8</sup> Moussala, [http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi\\_show\\_news](http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi_show_news); Etaka, [allafrica.com/stories/200605090902.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/200605090902.html); Morikang, [www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/35/205.html](http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/35/205.html); [www.prc.cm/index\\_en.php?link=le-mag/lecture-audience-pd&](http://www.prc.cm/index_en.php?link=le-mag/lecture-audience-pd&); Ndouyou-Mouliom, [fr.allafrica.com/stories/200812100600.html](http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/200812100600.html), accessed: April 17, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi\\_show\\_news](http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi_show_news), accessed: April 9, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Dongmo, <http://www.laptopdirect.co.za/laptops-sony.php>, accessed: April 18, 2011.

Commissioner at the time, Marina Valette, wife of the then ambassador of France and Bintou Bamba, Assistant Executive Secretary of African Synergy.<sup>11</sup>

This association has as its President the First Lady Chantal Biya. The General Coordinator who was appointed by the first lady in 2009 is Linda Yang, wife of the current Prime Minister of Cameroon, Philemon Yang and the Secretary General is Madam Jacqueline Koung, a Bessike who succeeded Madam Cecile Akame Mfoumou. Gladys Inoni, wife of the former Prime Minister, Ephraim Inoni is now an honorary member of CERAC. Wives of Ministers, women Ministers and other important women within the civil society circles are members of this association and are delegated from time to time to perform duties on behalf of CERAC in different parts of the country such as the giving of gifts to the poor, needy and disadvantaged populations.

On the other hand, the *Jeunesse Active pour Chantal Biya* (JACHABY) is a pro- government lobby group. In fact, it has been described as an organ of the Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM), which coincidentally is also the ruling party in the country. It is involved in lobbying for the First Lady Chantal Biya and by extension for the ruling party with the aim of perpetuating the incumbent's stay in power for as long as possible. It has simply been observed that JACHABY was created to honour Chantal Biya.<sup>12</sup> It is very logical to also state that JACHABY was created to give young people and especially women the opportunity to participate in the process of governing Cameroon. They felt excluded or under-represented in the structures of the Young Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (YCPDM), the youth wing of the ruling CPDM. Many of those leading the YCPDM are not young people and so do not articulate their aspirations but those of the leadership of the party. Dongmo argues that people join JACHABY and President Biya's Youth (PRESBY) simply because they are searching for opportunities and self positioning.<sup>13</sup> The association was formed after the formation of President Biya's Youths (PRESBY) to support the actions of the Head of State of Cameroon. PRESBY itself has been a subject of debate and it is also presently in crisis because of a power tussle between the elected president Paul Ngam and a usurper Ali Adji (Atanga 2011, 4; Ngam 2011, 7). More recently, another lobby group, the Biya Friends Club (BFC) led by Fru Ndi Edison of Bamenda has been formed to rally support for the ruling party and its leadership, President Paul Biya

### **Politicisation, Personalisation and Femocratisation of JACHABY/CERAC**

Although JACHABY/CERAC pass for apolitical associations of elite women and the First Lady of Cameroon, these have been highly publicly politicised, personalised and 'femocratised.' If First Ladyism is anything to go by as a form of imposed femocracy from above in Cameroon, then the activities of Chantal Biya are nothing but a continuation of the policies of the husband, President Paul Biya (Pokam 2006, 4). These policies are focused on keeping power at all cost. It has also been argued that CERAC's extension of its tentacles to all the nooks and crannies of Cameroon through 'humanitarian' endeavours is a subtle campaign for the ruling CPDM party which has been ridiculously described in pidgin English as *chop people dem money*, meaning a party that siphons peoples' money. Delegations of

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<sup>11</sup> [www.cameroon50.com/.../171-cerac.html](http://www.cameroon50.com/.../171-cerac.html), accessed: April 17, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Dikouba, [http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi\\_show\\_news](http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi_show_news), accessed: April 9, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Camerounlink.net, accessed: April 18, 2011.

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CERAC are provided big cars, missions, accommodation in hotels from the state treasury because the state is using them as a cover for tenure prolongation for the CPDM ‘natural candidate.’ Besides, the gifts of CERAC are purchased from tax payers’ money<sup>14</sup> although Cameroonians have never been told the source of money for these gifts which are distributed discriminately and mostly during a run up to crucial elections in the country.

In a political parties programme *Expression Directe* over the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) on 18-19 May 2000, the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) questioned the source of finances of CERAC. The party also intimated that CERAC had been “transformed into an Association that allows CPDM big shots to travel around the country to carry out a subtle campaign for the CPDM party.”<sup>15</sup> The SDF party also faulted CERAC on the basis of the fact that through it “long lines of vehicles of all makes virtually all belong to the state; and civil servants, ministers and other politicians who come around are paid from the state treasury.” The sister association JACHABY has been described as an organ of the CPDM<sup>16</sup>. If that is the role of JACHABY, then it is not the Chantal Biya’s Youths but simply youths of the CPDM party of President Paul Biya.

Besides, through CERAC and JACHABY, has emerged the personalisation and deification of the First Lady of Cameroon and by extension her husband the president of the country. Dikouba argues that JACHABY was created to honour Chantal Biya.<sup>17</sup> This is a form of personalisation of position, leadership and power. Through JACHABY, the First Lady personalises power as the wife of the President who is a ‘natural candidate’ for the country. Through the so called gifts from the First Lady to different groups and people, she has received titles such as *Mafor* (Queen Mother) in the North West Region of Cameroon during the visit of the presidential couple to the region to preside over the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Cameroon Armed Forces in December 2010. Other titles have been given to her in different parts of the country like the ‘fon of fons’ title which was given to the husband in the North West Region in 1983, during a state visit to the region barely a few months after his accession to the helm of state affairs in Cameroon. Title giving gives one the impression that those awarded these titles will forever remain queen mother of queen mothers’ whether the husband leaves power or not. Such is a culture that breeds the personalisation of governance and use of public space within a liberalised environment. Neither the First Lady nor her collaborators and beneficiaries of her ‘gifts’ think that apart from CERAC, there are no other avenues for their assistance. The association has more or less replaced the Ministry of Social Affairs and Agriculture in doing what these ministries should be doing to the socially derived and rural farmers.

In one of the outings of CERAC to Mbiyeh village in Donga Mantung following a renovation of the Mbiyeh Integrated Health Centre in February 2011, the Mayor for Ndu Mr Nfor David Karngong poured encomiums on CERAC and by extension the First Lady when he said that “CERAC has become the mother of mothers, the parent of orphans and the husband of widows.” This statement is a form of worship of Chantal Biya who is the founder President and sponsor of its activities by a Mayor who was voted into office from the opposition SDF.

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<sup>14</sup> Dikouba, [http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi\\_show\\_news](http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi_show_news), accessed: April 9, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> [www.sdfparty.org/english/releases/205.php](http://www.sdfparty.org/english/releases/205.php), accessed: April 17, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> [www.freebase.com/view/en/chantal\\_biya](http://www.freebase.com/view/en/chantal_biya)

<sup>17</sup> (Dikouba, [http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi\\_show\\_news](http://www.cameroon-info.net/cmi_show_news)), accessed: April 9, 2011.

A deeper interpretation of this statement shows that the First Lady is regarded as that mother who can solve all the problems of the people but in reality this cannot be true because CERAC cannot claim to play the role of the Cameroon government in providing solutions to the problems of its people.

Through CERAC and JACHABY, the First Lady's effigies like those of her husband have been placed on clothes, calendars, offices and other public places. How else can an association be personalised and the First Lady deified through the conspicuous display of her effigies in public. The SDF opposition party lambasted this personality cult as anti-democratic.<sup>18</sup> The public display of effigies breeds democratic intolerance and promotes deification of individuals beyond their ability to deliver and govern to the satisfaction of all and sundry. This may make them to erroneously think that they are being worshipped and puffed-up because they are very popular when in actual fact those doing so are engaged in self positioning<sup>19</sup> and not support. This culture of effigy public display and worship in public and private spaces is a manifestation of sycophancy for circumstantial supporters and pretentious leadership. The First Lady of Niger in the 1960s Aisha Hamani Diouri was reputed to have personalised power to the extent that it was alleged that she controlled the husband like a marionette. Through the personalisation of power, she manipulated the country's elite and dictated the pace of cultural and social trends. When the *coup d'état* of 1966 took place, she was killed and her husband spared. Her crime was the personalisation of power in Niger.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, through the activities of JACHABY and CERAC in Cameroon, women of all walks of life have found space to exercise power in their own way and to contribute to filling a void in the management and distribution of resources of the country. Many women of position within the civil service and parastatals have found in CERAC an avenue through which to share their experiences on socio-economic issues of the Cameroonian masses. More importantly, they have used it to examine best strategies of manipulation to remain in leading positions and reap the benefits there from. This is what wives of ministers, women ministers, female directors of companies and other state structures do to survive and support their husbands' political ambitions. Prior to the creation of CERAC, these women did not have a structured association through which they could mobilise different capabilities more meaningfully for their good as well as for their kinsmen and women. They take all forms of excuses and lavishly squander public resources placed under their control in the name of supporting or running errands for CERAC.

Through CERAC, the elite women who are fewer than the ordinary rural women have tried to occupy a higher socio-political space and to maintain it by hook or crook. They occasionally organise meetings in the different regions of the country during which they deliver gifts of farm implements, drugs, beds and other basic needs for the rural women. Through this, they have justified access to state funds through missions, petrol bonds, accommodation in hotels and other associated benefits. As long as they carry out many sensitisation tours to the region, they secure state resources to justify their continuous expenditure and loyalty to the ruling party however unconvincing this might be.

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<sup>18</sup> [www.sdfparty.org/english/releases/205.php](http://www.sdfparty.org/english/releases/205.php), accessed: April 17, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Dongmo, Camerounlink.net, accessed: April 18, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Ibrahim, <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/first-lady-syndrome>, accessed: April 16, 2011.

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The participation of elite women in the activities of CERAC has made some of them to become popular in their own constituency although this seems not to be visible for all cases. From the visibility of these women, it is likely many of them will gradually and steadily become a force to reckon with during future electoral consultations at both the local and national levels. These activities of CERAC also offer some of these women the opportunity to enrich their private accounts which can be used during future campaigns for elective positions into municipal councils and parliament. Besides, smart women have used their militancy in CERAC to mobilise rural women to discuss common socio-economic problems and find ways of solving them. They collect material from CERAC like farm implements and use them to generate additional wealth through group work although this is not the case in all circumstances. It is becoming clear to them that economic power leads to political influence and power. Although mobilisation has not been easy, it remains a good method for women to capture power from below. Using the masses, the elite women can unleash meaningful change which will see women leaders in the political terrain in Cameroon. Through CERAC women have found space to provide an alternative solution to the empowerment of the rural population by providing them not only with immediate consumable products like maggi, rice and soap but those that can stimulate economic growth wheel-barrow and hoes.

Through friends of Cameroon, women leaders of CERAC have reached out to wives of diplomats and other international female workers working in Cameroon and broaden their space for lobbying through them to their governments to address burning issues about the emancipation of women in different African countries. Women issues have continued to preoccupy the international community and during important national and international events these concerns have been re-echoed. During the celebration of the Commonwealth Day in March 2011 for example, the Minister Delegate in the Ministry of External Relations Dion Ngute while recounting the contributions of the government of Cameroon towards the improvement of the lot of women, recognised that the number of women in positions of authority still remains low when compared with the proportion of the country's population (Bainkong 2011). The inability of CERAC women to occupy very influential positions in the governing structure of Cameroon has made them to find in the activities of the association, an opportunity for participation in governance indirectly and to use bed time discussions to determine the direction of government social policy.

While some elderly and working class women have monopolised CERAC to the exclusion of young girls, these girls have carved out for themselves space to exercise freedom of speech and to debate party issues. In fact, they have opted to circumvent their exclusion in CERAC to express themselves without strings attached in a grouping of their own. This explains why JACHABY was styled as active youths for Chantal Biya so that they could take part and be seen to be visible in the socio-political arena. The creation of JACHABY is what might be described as competing femocracies based on age and class. Competition such as the one between the YCPDM and PRESBY have only created more problems because party structures have been abandoned for other structures which offer opportunities like the JACHABY and PRESBY. Dongmo<sup>21</sup> has observed that competitions by JACHABY and PRESBY are a search for opportunities and self positioning within the political structure of Cameroon. This positioning might take the form of socio-political or economic benefits. Others have also pointed to PRESBY as doing for Biya just what JACHABY does for Chantal Biya (Ngam 2011: 7). In spite of these, there are lessons that can be drawn from the activities of CERAC and JACHABY.

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<sup>21</sup> Camerounlink.net, accessed: April 18, 2011.

## **Lessons for Gender and Democratic Governance in Cameroon**

Following the female ‘invasion’ of the socio-political space in Cameroon and the consequences on the country and women several lessons can be drawn from it as a way of improving participation and governance in Cameroon. The support and participation of women in the political life of a country through an enabling environment can be valuable for its image, development and the promotion of equality. In Cameroon, women make up more than half the population and need to seize the opportunity to assert themselves through official state structures and not associated structures which are basically *ad hoc*. Elsewhere in the continent like in Senegal and Ghana, Elizabeth Diouf and Nana Rawlings (former First Ladies of Senegal and Ghana) recognised and used the female vote to secure a tenure prolongation for their husbands (Pokam 2006, 4). This was however through the use of unofficial state structures and it did not serve the interest of the female voters but a narrow group of privileged female elite. It laid the foundation for strife in the future.

The projection of ‘charitable’ activities to secure the stay in power of bad leaders has always been a source of conflict. CERAC and JACHABY were formed as apolitical associations but their activities have shown that they are not apolitical because apart from worshipping Chantal Biya, these two associations have in their public activities become political arms of the ruling CPDM. This again only reinforces the argument that women cannot seek to occupy socio-political space and at the same time abandon their right of leadership to support those who continue to exclude them from leadership. Society should recognise that cultural barriers notwithstanding, women should be given the opportunity because they have and will continue to prove their mettle as competent members of parliament and other important positions of decision making in the society (Kinsai 1999, 7). In fact, Cameroonian women need to come out in their force so that men may know that in politics these days the front bench is for the one who can deliver the goods and not necessarily whether the person is male or female (Liga 1995, 1-2).

The dynamic nature of some women has broken the myth that some professions or businesses are reserved only for men. The case of Francoise Foning, current President of the Worldwide Network of Women Entrepreneurs (FCEM) has shown that women have successfully gotten into the spaces of men and doing well. Another prominent woman Hon Rameline Kamga is the head of the Cameroon Association of Women Entrepreneurs (Mosima 2011, 10). Such achievements are pointers that women should fight for their rights because they will succeed as a group in the struggle than as individuals. The success of a few of them who actually serve the population will cause many to rethink their place in society and how this can be pulled together for the common good.

There is a subtle political cronyism which is a result of ‘First Ladyism.’ It has made the First Lady a very powerful individual who is more or less “worshipped” by the womenfolk. Femocracy is doomed to create other problems for women and governance related problems if used as a form of political cronyism. The activities of the First Lady, her networks and rationale for them as well as sources of finance need to be publicly known. If this remains a secret because the system is using cronies to perpetuate its stay in power, then femocracy from the point of view of the humanitarian activities of the First Lady will become a source of strife rather than an opportunity for women to successfully negotiate their way into the governing structures of Cameroon. As it now stands, many of them have no voice and the activities of Chantal Biya are a kind of an imposition of femocratic governance. More often than not, those who are sent to the field to distribute things to the rural poor by CERAC

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spend time talking about the First Lady doing this or that for them. The most interesting thing about it is that the opinions of these rural women are never sought before the things are given them. This is because they will need to make their own contribution to the things they would prefer to have and the way CERAC functions. This is however taken for granted and a hiatus remains between the elite and the population. This kind of personalisation of humanitarian activities, which in the first place should be carried out by the state needs to be discouraged for female participatory approach to development issues in all its forms in Cameroon.

Femocracy should be meant for the general good or the collective good of women and not for a restricted few who are accountable only to themselves. This cannot help the womenfolk in Cameroon. Rather, Cameroonian elite women should openly declare their candidacies for elective positions and stop being tossed about by way of distribution of gifts from sources that remain a guided secret. How can the state have limitation of funds to provide social services to its population but an association without defined sources of funding is able to do so within the same state. Very few women are chasing the wind rather than militate in politics in their own right. It is only when they militate fully in politics as part of the decision making process that they can lobby for the implementation of laws that would guarantee rural development, education and the provision of the health needs of the population. When they limit themselves to gifts to a people who have been neglected deliberately by the state structure and cannot continuously sustain this, then they rather create serious problems for the people who should be taught how to raise these things rather than wait to be given to them all the time.

### **Conclusion**

During the past twenty one years, the democratic culture in Cameroon has evolved to include things that were hitherto not part of the culture of the people. In spite of the reintroduction of democracy in the 1990s the single party mentality continues. Representation in the political structures of the country is overwhelmingly male centred. There are very few women leaders of political parties and civil society organisations and this has given room for men to dictate policies and their implementation.

Around this same period, there is sustained global pressure for African societies to open up to equal opportunities for women and men. While this has received lip service for most of the time, some elite women use their positions and association with state functionaries to create spaces for themselves and articulate common challenges for women as a whole. Besides, the system pretends to promote gender equality through the formation of associations to sing the praises of the First Lady and prolong the President's stay in power.

In this essay we have examined how two associations namely JACHABY and CERAC have effectively been used to venerate and deify Chantal Biya and the President of the Republic of Cameroon, Paul Biya. This has been made possible through wives of ministers, women ministers, illiterate women and other influential women in the society. State resources have been mobilised to grandstand and cheerlead women into acquiescence within a system that has lost its legitimacy and vitality. Femocracy in Cameroon needs to be redefined so that it does not remain egoistic, exclusive and a stepping stone for a privileged elite few within the women-folk as it is with the men-folk.

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