

# The Converging and Diverging Facts of Local Governance (Decentralisation) in Cameroon History, 1961-2010

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## Abstract

Independence in Cameroon brought fundamental changes in government and administration. The state began with a Federal structure and two state governments that lasted for ten years. On 20 May 1972, President Ahidjo supplanted the Federal arrangement with a unitary constitution, aiming to consolidate national unity and enhance economic, social, and cultural development. This study examines how landmark legislations such as the Local Council Law of 1974 and the Chieftaincy Decree of 1977 impinged on local governance and development. Using primary archival sources from the National Archives Buea (NAB) and Bamenda Provincial Archives (BPA), government decrees, official gazettes, and legal texts, combined with secondary scholarly literature, this research adopts a chronological approach to analyze the evolution of decentralization in Cameroon from 1961 to 2010. The study reveals persistent tensions between centralization and decentralization, between chiefs and state administrators, and between East and West Cameroon institutional systems. In designing new local council regulations, the government harmonized East and West Cameroon structures, but predominantly retained the former East Cameroon managerial system (Instrument de Commandement des Communes Rurales), creating incompatibility issues that persist today in both culture and practice. The concentration of central finance, public service authority, and control of local communities in Yaoundé created structural impediments to effective decentralization. The 1996 constitutional reform introduced the concept of a decentralized unitary state, while the 2004 decentralization laws established frameworks for transferring powers to regional and local authorities. However, implementation gaps between legal provisions and practical reality remain significant. This study concludes that effective decentralization in Cameroon is possible when divergent historical facts are understood and resolved, coupled with genuine political will to devolve power to local communities.

## Keywords

Converging, Diverging, Local Governance, Decentralisation, Cameroon

## Résumé

L'indépendance du Cameroun a profondément transformé son organisation politique et administrative, passant d'un système fédéral à un État unitaire en 1972 afin de renforcer l'unité nationale et le développement. Cette étude analyse l'impact des principales réformes juridiques, notamment la loi de 1974 sur les conseils locaux et le décret de 1977 sur la chefferie, sur la gouvernance locale et la décentralisation entre 1961 et 2010. S'appuyant sur des sources archivistiques primaires, des textes juridiques officiels et une littérature scientifique secondaire, la recherche adopte une approche chronologique.

Les résultats révèlent des tensions persistantes entre centralisation et décentralisation, ainsi qu'entre les systèmes institutionnels du Cameroun oriental et occidental. Bien que les réformes constitutionnelles de 1996 et les lois de 2004 aient établi le cadre d'un État unitaire décentralisé, d'importants écarts subsistent entre les dispositions légales et leur application effective. L'étude conclut qu'une décentralisation efficace nécessite la prise en compte des héritages historiques et une véritable volonté politique de transférer le pouvoir aux collectivités locales.

## Mots-clés

Convergence, Divergence, Gouvernance Locale, Décentralisation, Cameroun.

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## INTRODUCTION

Independence brought fundamental transformations in government and administration in Cameroon. A Federal Government and two State Governments emerged, creating a complex governance structure that would shape local administration for decades. The Federal system, which operated from 1961 to 1972, gave way to a unitary state following a referendum on 20 May 1972. President Ahidjo proclaimed that the Unitary State aimed to consolidate national unity to enhance economic, social, and cultural development (Official Gazette of the Federal Republic of Cameroon [OGFRC], 1972). This transition raised critical questions: How did Cameroonians adapt to the new constitutional arrangement? What were the implications for local governance and traditional authority structures? How did decentralization evolve within this increasingly centralized framework?

This study addresses these questions by examining political and administrative structures implemented by national and local governments from 1961 to 2010. The period encompasses three critical phases: the Federal era (1961–1972), the early unitary state period with major local governance reforms (1972–1982), and the gradual movement toward decentralization (1982–2010), including the pivotal 1996 constitutional reform and 2004 decentralization laws. By analyzing archival materials, government decrees, and local responses to these policies, this research illuminates the persistent tensions between centralization and decentralization that continue to shape Cameroon's governance landscape.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Decentralization, according to Treisman (2007), refers to the delegation of power to local communities with respect to a central government. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) defines it as the transfer of powers and responsibilities from the central government to elected authorities at subnational or local levels (regional governments, municipalities), possessing some

degree of autonomy. This transfer reconfigures relationships between central and local governments toward more cooperative and strategic roles for national governments, representing a multi-dimensional concept covering political, administrative, and fiscal dimensions.

Theoretical perspectives on decentralization distinguish between three primary forms: deconcentration, delegation, and devolution (Smoke, 2015). Deconcentration involves redistributing administrative responsibilities within the central government, with field agents remaining accountable to central ministries. Delegation transfers managerial responsibility for specific functions to organizations outside the regular central government structure, though central government retains ultimate authority. Devolution transfers real decision-making power and authority to quasi-autonomous local units, creating legally separate governmental entities with clear geographical boundaries (Smoke, 2015; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

In African contexts, scholars emphasize that decentralization reforms often remain legal constructs without corresponding political autonomy, producing what Olowu and Wunsch (2004) describe as a "decentralization gap" between law and practice. Crook and Manor (1998) demonstrate that in many African states, including francophone countries like Cameroon, decentralization has historically been characterized by administrative deconcentration rather than genuine devolution. Wunsch and Olowu (1990) argue that effective decentralization in Africa requires not merely institutional reforms but fundamental shifts in political culture, resource allocation, and elite commitment to local empowerment.

The Cameroon case presents unique complexities due to its dual colonial heritage. Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997) analyze how British and French colonial administrative traditions created incompatible governance systems in West and East Cameroon respectively. British indirect rule empowered Native Authorities and traditional

chiefs, while French direct administration marginalized traditional authority in favor of centralized bureaucratic control (Nkwi & Nyamnjoh, 1997). This institutional divergence, scholars argue, profoundly shaped post-independence governance challenges (Konings, 2011).

Local governance, as defined by the Michigan Municipal League (2019), encompasses the system by which decisions are made and implemented at the local level within defined geographical areas. It involves processes of managing public services, addressing community issues, and representing local residents' interests through elected officials, government departments, and community organizations. Local government constitutes the lowest level of public administration within a territory, responsible for delivering essential services including education, public safety, infrastructure, and social services (Afonso & Araújo, 2007). In democratic systems, local governments provide citizens with opportunities for decision-making participation and mechanisms for holding local authorities accountable. This study examines these concepts within Cameroon's evolving governance framework from 1961 to 2010.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative historical research design, utilizing both primary and secondary sources to trace the evolution of decentralization and local governance in Cameroon from 1961 to 2010. The chronological approach allows for systematic analysis of governance transformations across three distinct periods: the Federal era (1961–1972), the Unitary State period with major administrative reforms (1972–1982), and the gradual decentralization phase (1982–2010).

### Data Sources

Primary sources constitute the empirical foundation of this study. Archival materials were accessed from the National Archives Buea (NAB) and Bamenda Provincial Archives (BPA), including administrative files, ministerial circulars, meeting

minutes, and correspondence between colonial and post-colonial authorities. Government decrees, laws, and ordinances were obtained from the Journal Officiel de la République Unie du Cameroun (JORUC), Journal Officiel du Cameroun (JOC), and West Cameroon Official Gazettes. Constitutional texts, including the 1961 Federal Constitution, 1972 Unitary Constitution, and 1996 Constitutional reform, were analyzed for their provisions on local governance and decentralization.

Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and theses on Cameroon's political history, decentralization theory, and African governance. Key texts include Fanso (1989) on Cameroon's post-independence history, Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997, 2011) on anglophone-francophone relations, and theoretical works by Treisman (2007), Smoke (2015), and Olowu and Wunsch (2004) on decentralization in comparative and African contexts.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Archival research was conducted through systematic review of administrative files organized by division and subject matter. Files were selected based on relevance to local governance, chieftaincy affairs, local council administration, and decentralization policies. Government gazettes and official journals were examined chronologically to identify all relevant laws, decrees, and ordinances affecting local governance during the study period.

Data analysis employed historical-comparative methods. Primary sources were analyzed to establish factual chronologies of administrative changes, policy implementations, and local responses. Content analysis of legal texts identified shifts in power distribution between central government, local administrators, and traditional authorities. Comparative analysis examined differences between East and West Cameroon governance systems and their attempted harmonization. Theoretical frameworks on decentralization types (deconcentration, delegation, devolution) guided interpretation of governance reforms.

**Limitations**

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, archival materials from some divisions and periods remain incomplete or inaccessible, potentially creating gaps in the historical record. Second, the study relies primarily on government documents and official sources, which may reflect elite perspectives more than grassroots experiences. Third, the period after 2004 (when major decentralization laws were enacted) receives less detailed analysis due to limited archival documentation for recent events. Despite these limitations, the extensive primary source base and triangulation with secondary literature provide robust empirical foundations for the study's conclusions.

**POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES, 1961–1972**

Following the United Nations supervised plebiscite in Southern Cameroons on 11 February 1961, representatives from Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon convened at Foumban in July 1961 to draft a Constitution defining the new state's structure (Annuaire National, 1968). The resulting Federal Republic of Cameroon comprised two states—East and West Cameroon—each headed by a Prime Minister, with federal authority vested in the President and Federal Assembly. Amadou Ahidjo, President of la République du Cameroun, became Federal President, while John Ngu Foncha, Premier of Southern Cameroons, assumed the Vice Presidency.

Federal administration operated on two levels: central and regional. The Federal Government, based in Yaoundé, controlled ministries including Foreign Affairs, Defense, Economy, and Territorial Administration, which supervised local administration. Six administrative regions were created, with the Federated State of West Cameroon constituting one region. Inspectors of administration coordinated Federal Services within regions and commanded police and armed forces to maintain order (Annuaire National, 1968). This institutional arrangement represented deconcentration rather than devolution, as central authority remained

paramount despite regional structures (Smoke, 2015).

The second level of administration concerned the two Federated States. Each state maintained linkages with the Federal Government through appropriate Federal Ministries. For effective local control, the country was divided into thirty-nine administrative Divisions, nine in West Cameroon (Fanso, 1989). Divisions were headed by Senior Divisional Officers (SDO) or *Préfets* in East Cameroon, with Sub-Divisions under Divisional Officers (*Sous-Préfets*) and Districts under District Heads. These local administrators, appointed by Presidential decree, performed dual roles as federal and state officers, reporting both to the Federal Minister of Territorial Administration and appropriate state ministries through Federal Inspectors.

**Local Governance in West Cameroon: British Legacy and Adaptation**

In West Cameroon, local governance fell under the Ministry of Local Government (later Ministry of Interior), which administered through local councils that progressively dismantled colonial Native Authorities (File ja/a/1957/1, 1957). Universal adult suffrage elections marked this transition, with council plenary sessions serving as regulatory organs. Senior Divisional Officers retained supervisory authority, continuing the colonial pattern of administrative oversight (West Cameroon Law No. 107, 1963).

The position of chiefs within these new structures remained contentious. When Premier Foncha's government took office in 1959, it prioritized chiefs' welfare, reflecting political debt to traditional rulers whose support secured the KNDP's electoral victory. In December 1960, the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly passed a chieftaincy law establishing a register of recognized chiefs maintained by the Ministry of Local Government (Southern Cameroon Official Gazette, 1960). The Bamenda Senior Divisional Officer prepared a list of recognized chiefs for his division in 1961 (File LGP700/5/1, 1961), followed by additional registers after the 1963 amendment (Law No. 63/LW/3, 1963; File B. 1783/86, 1964).

## ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANISATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE, 1972–1982

The promulgation of a Unitary Constitution in June 1972 marked the official inception of the United Republic of Cameroon. Sovereignty vested in the people, exercised through the President and elected National Assembly (OGFRC Supplementary Issue, 1972; Decree No. 72-D-239, 1972). State powers were assumed by Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary arms, with the President serving as both Head of State and Government.

The Constitution empowered the President to establish, regulate, and direct all administrative services necessary for governance (Journal Officiel de la République Unie du Cameroun [JORUC], 1979). This arrangement concentrated politics and administration around the presidency, demonstrating firm executive control through presidential prerogative to appoint local administrators as direct representatives. Unlike Colonial and Federal periods where administration and authority were shared between Central Administration and Native Authorities, the new Constitution abolished the House of Chiefs, signaling unwillingness to share presidential power with traditional authorities.

## THE 1996 CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM: INTRODUCING DECENTRALIZED UNITARY STATE

The 1996 constitutional amendment marked a watershed in Cameroon's decentralization trajectory. Article 1(2) of the revised Constitution declared: "The Republic of Cameroon shall be a decentralized unitary State" (Constitution of Cameroon, 1996). This provision represented a fundamental departure from previous constitutional frameworks, explicitly recognizing decentralization as a constitutional principle. Article 55 enumerated Decentralized Territorial Units (DTUs) including regions and councils, establishing the legal foundation for sub-national governance structures.

However, as Konings (2011) analyzes, the 1996 reform embodied contradictions between decentralization rhetoric and centralization

reality. While proclaiming decentralization, the Constitution maintained strong presidential controls over local governance. Article 55(3) stipulated that councils would be established by law and "may comprise several traditional chiefdoms," acknowledging traditional authority but subordinating it to statutory frameworks. More critically, the Constitution provided that "regional and local authorities shall be corporate bodies of public law" with "administrative and financial autonomy for the management of regional and local interests" (Article 56), yet implementation mechanisms remained undefined.

The constitutional reform's impact on chieftaincy institutions proved particularly significant. Article 57(2) stated that traditional chiefs "shall be the custodians of local customs and traditions" and "may assist in the administration of justice," formally recognizing traditional authority within the state structure. However, this recognition came with constraints—chiefs functioned as auxiliaries to state administration rather than autonomous authorities (Nkwi & Nyamnjuh, 1997). The "may assist" formulation indicated permissive rather than guaranteed participation in governance.

Analytically, the 1996 reform exemplifies what Olowu and Wunsch (2004) term the "decentralization gap" constitutional provisions establishing decentralization frameworks without corresponding power devolution. The Constitution created legal structures for decentralized governance but retained central government control over their operationalization. No implementing legislation emerged until 2004, leaving the constitutional provisions largely dormant for eight years. This delay reflects what Konings (2011) identifies as reluctance within Cameroon's central power structures to genuinely devolve authority to local entities.

## THE 2004 DECENTRALIZATION LAWS: FRAMEWORKS AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

The 2004 decentralization laws Law No. 2004/17, Law No. 2004/18, and Law No. 2004/19 finally

provided implementing legislation for the 1996 constitutional provisions. Law No. 2004/17 established general rules governing decentralization, defining fundamental principles and institutional frameworks. Law No. 2004/18 governed regional orientation, while Law No. 2004/19 addressed council governance (Republic of Cameroon, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

Law No. 2004/17 defined decentralization as "the transfer by the State to regional and local authorities of particular powers and appropriate resources" (Article 2). The law delineated transferred competencies across multiple domains including economic development, health, education, culture, and infrastructure (Articles 15-29). Each domain specified responsibilities transferred to councils and regions, creating comprehensive frameworks for local governance authority.

However, critical implementation challenges emerged. First, fiscal decentralization remained incomplete. While the laws provided for local taxation authority and state resource transfers, actual resource devolution proved limited. Central government retained control over major revenue sources, leaving local authorities financially dependent. Research by development organizations documented that most councils lacked adequate budgets to fulfill transferred responsibilities, creating what might be termed a "competence-resource gap" (World Bank, 2010).

Second, administrative capacity constraints hampered implementation. Many councils, especially rural ones, lacked personnel with technical expertise to execute transferred functions. The civil service system remained highly centralized, with local government staff appointed and controlled by central ministries. This created accountability conflicts local officials answered to central authorities rather than local constituencies, undermining genuine local autonomy.

Third, political dynamics limited real power devolution. As analyzed earlier, the electoral system favored the ruling CPDM party, which maintained overwhelming dominance in local

councils. Presidential appointment of "government delegates" (later termed "Super Mayors") to head major urban councils ensured central control over politically strategic territories. The phenomenon of party discipline meant elected councillors often implemented central directives rather than local preferences.

The 2008 follow-up legislation (Decree 2008/013 and Decree 2008/014) established a National Council on Decentralization and an Inter-Ministerial Committee to guide implementation (Republic of Cameroon, 2008a, 2008b). These bodies aimed to coordinate decentralization policy across ministries and monitor progress. However, their advisory rather than executive nature limited effectiveness in compelling ministries to genuinely devolve powers.

Empirically, decentralization implementation from 2004 to 2010 revealed persistent centralization. Central government continued controlling local government appointments, budgets, and major decisions. The "gradual" implementation approach adopted by authorities meant that by 2010, many provisions of the 2004 laws remained unimplemented. This gradualism, while justified on capacity-building grounds, effectively maintained central control while providing decentralization rhetoric.

Theoretically, Cameroon's 2004-2010 experience exemplifies deconcentration rather than devolution (Smoke, 2015). Administrative responsibilities were redistributed to local levels, but decision-making authority and resources remained centralized. This aligns with broader patterns in francophone African states documented by Crook and Manor (1998), where decentralization reforms often preserve central control through fiscal dependency, administrative hierarchy, and political mechanisms

## CONCLUSION

This study examined government policies and reforms from 1961 to 2010 concerning local governance in Cameroon. The evidence demonstrates persistent tensions between decentralization rhetoric and centralization

reality. From the Federal period through the Unitary State and into the decentralization era, central government consistently retained control over local governance despite constitutional and legal provisions ostensibly devolving authority.

Several converging facts emerge. First, the dual colonial heritage created incompatible governance systems in East and West Cameroon that proved difficult to harmonize post-independence. The retention of the East Cameroon managerial system for local councils marginalized West Cameroonian traditions of Native Authority participation in local governance. Second, traditional authority embodied in chiefs experienced progressive marginalization as state administration centralized. While laws recognized chiefs, they functioned as state auxiliaries rather than autonomous local leaders. Third, concentration of finance, authority, and control in Yaoundé created structural obstacles to genuine decentralization.

The diverging facts prove equally significant. The 1996 constitutional reform and 2004 decentralization laws created comprehensive legal frameworks for decentralization. These provisions aligned with international best practices and addressed many governance challenges identified in earlier periods. However, implementation gaps between legal provisions and practical reality remained vast. Financial resources, administrative capacity, and political will necessary for genuine devolution were absent or insufficient.

Analytically, Cameroon's decentralization experience from 1961 to 2010 represents administrative deconcentration rather than genuine devolution. Central government redistributed some administrative tasks to local levels while retaining decision-making authority and resource control. This pattern exemplifies the "decentralization gap" identified by Olowu and Wunsch (2004) in African governance legal frameworks establish decentralization principles that political and administrative realities fail to implement.

For effective decentralization to occur in Cameroon, several conditions must be met. First, the historical divergence between East and West Cameroon governance traditions must be genuinely reconciled rather than papered over through imposition of one system. Second, fiscal devolution must accompany administrative decentralization local authorities need adequate, reliable resources to fulfill responsibilities. Third, traditional authority systems require constitutional recognition with genuine rather than symbolic powers. Fourth, and most fundamentally, political will at the highest levels of government to genuinely share power with local entities is essential.

The study's findings have broader implications for decentralization in post-colonial African states with dual colonial heritages. Legal frameworks, however comprehensive, prove insufficient without corresponding fiscal devolution and political commitment. Administrative capacity building requires sustained investment and cannot serve as indefinite justification for delaying implementation. Reconciling traditional and modern governance systems demands genuine accommodation rather than subordination of one to the other.

Future research should examine decentralization implementation after 2010, particularly following the 2010 regional government elections and subsequent reforms. Comparative studies with other francophone African states could illuminate whether Cameroon's patterns reflect broader regional trends. Additionally, grassroots perspectives on decentralization impacts deserve greater attention this study's reliance on government documents and elite sources provides limited insight into local experiences of governance reforms.

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