

**North West-South West Divide Within the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon:
The 1985 Synod Election Crisis**

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Abstract

Power struggles have roiled African Christian churches in multiple forms, promoting conflicts, stalling mission work and disrupting peaceful communities. The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) is no exception and has been the theatre of ethnic and regional differences expressed as power struggles pitching Christians from the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. The principal cleavage in the PCC since her accession to autonomy from the Basel Mission in 1957 has all along resulted from power struggles. This article addresses the tensions-resulting from persistent power struggles within the PCC. Such power struggles have often led to divisions and breakaway attempts within its governing structures, and this has negatively affected the growth of this Protestant denomination. Specifically, the paper investigates the 1985 Synod election crisis, discusses its manifestations, examines efforts towards its resolution, and highlights peace-building initiatives that followed. Its central argument is that North-West/South-West regional interests took precedence over collective concerns in the PCC, placing the church on the edge of ruin. It concludes that, historically, the North-West/South-West dichotomy has been the main factor in the power struggle and resultant tensions within the PCC. The crisis climaxed in 1985 when Synod elections allowed two North Westerners to occupy the two top posts of Moderator and Synod Clerk. The authorities of the church have managed to maintain the delicate balance of authority between the two regions by attempting to eliminate the dominance enjoyed by North Westerners through constitutional reforms.

Keywords: *Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, power struggle, North Westerners, South Westerners, Synod Elections.*

Introduction

Ethnic and regional identities have often been defining features in African Christian churches and have manifested in divisions and conflicts. The church is not therefore a stranger to internal dissensions and divisions. Anthony Smith (1991: 16) confirms this by stressing that “religious communities are often closely related to ethnic and regional identities. Thus, churches have always faced difficulties in consolidating unity among their multitudes of diverse and often discordant ethnic and regional groups. Despite

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sustained efforts by leaders of these churches to eliminate such cleavages in view of fostering greater cohesion among Christians, ethnic and regional feuds have stubbornly continued to animate most congregations thereby rendering the churches' mission of love without borders a far-fetch dream (Gushiken, 2015: 17).

In Cameroon, Catholic, mainstream Protestant and Pentecostal churches have wrestled with identity issues giving rise to power struggles and attempted breakaways. The multiethnic and multiregional makeup of these churches have, at times, placed ethnic and regional identities beyond spiritual identity, and this has occasioned entrenched dichotomies and tussles for leadership positions along ethnic and regional lines (Gushiken, 2015: 19). The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) is one of such churches that have been roiled by ethnic and regional cleavages. The PCC gained autonomy from the Basel Mission in 1957 and inherited ethnic and regional identities that were promoted for over six decades. For instance, the divide between the Bakossi and the Bafaw Christians in the South West Region which resulted from the transfer of the theological seminary from Nyasoso to Kumba almost shattered the foundation of the PCC.¹ But the principal problem in the PCC has been the dichotomy between North Westerners and South Westerners caused by injurious regional consciousness (Lang, 2013: 35). The South Westerners felt cheated and dominated by North Westerners at various levels of the church's administration as well as in the location of its lucrative socio-economic services such as schools, hospitals, and businesses.

The unprecedented and controversial election of two North Westerners (Rev. Henry Awasom and Rev. Jonas Dah) in 1985 as the church's Moderator and Synod Clerk respectively, exposed the gravity of the mistrust, suspicion and disunity that existed between these people. Given that these were the two top-most positions in the church, Christians of the South-West threatened to secede and create their own denomination if the situation was not redressed. These power struggles persisted because of the lack of sensitivity and consideration to the various ethnic and regional identities within the PCC. Using the 1985 Synod Election crisis as a case example, this paper examines power struggles within the PCC especially as they affected North Westerners and South Westerners, almost shattering the church. The paper revisits the roots of the 1957 election

¹ The *Cameroon Times*, Vol. 25, No. 29, 1985, p. 3.

crisis, examines the manifestations of the rift among peoples of the two regions, discusses measures taken to resolve it, and finally, makes proposals for long-term resolution.

An excursion into the literature on identity issues in churches reveals a recent focus on power struggles. Boozer who studied the effect of ethnicity on Biblical unity found that “ethnic tensions are a cause of disunity in both the Old and New Testaments.” (2019: iii) This has also found expression within Christian churches due to the perpetuation of ethnic inequalities and favouritism. Gushiken (2015: 19) analyzes multi-ethnic churches, stressing that the failure to cultivate the participatory community spirit that pays attention to all ethnic voices, generates conflicts and unhealthy power tussles. Writing on the “Genocide in Rwanda”, T. Longman (2001: 163) demonstrates how ethnic conflicts within Christian churches fostered the genocide, stressing that in Rwanda, Christianity had become a religion defined by struggles for power. This capacity of Christian churches to harbor ethnic and regional identities capable of generating power struggles and conflicts is also emphasized by Mullins (1987: 323). The crux of his research is the ethnic-Christian church link, and he emphasizes the fact that the close identification of some Christians with their regions or ethnic communities promotes power struggle (Mullins, 1987: 323). In a previous study, we concluded that the PCC developed in a way that favoured the entrenchment of regional and ethnic identities (Lang, 2013: 34). Little wonder the church has been consistently visited by constitutional crises and power struggles underpinned by these opposing identities. This article builds on the religion-identity nexus to analyze how the regional dichotomy between Christians of Northwest and Southwest extraction was a driving force of power struggles within the PCC.

Although there is growing scholarly interest in the link between ethno-regional identities and Christian churches, it remains an overlooked phenomenon in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. As such, this study aims at filling this gap by examining power struggles within this mainstream Protestant church. The paper argues that power struggles within the PCC involved ethnicity and regional sensitivities between North and South-Westerners as important factors. It was this religion-identity connection that was responsible for the Synod Election crisis witnessed by the PCC in 1985.

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Road to the Election Crisis

The 1985 election crisis in the PCC resulted from diverse sources. It was occasioned by the struggle for power between Christians from the Northwest and Southwest regions. The involvement of Cameroon in World War One and the resulting Anglo-French partition of the territory in 1916 into British and French Cameroons nursed the seeds of the crisis. During this war, all Basel missionaries of German origin were interned and subsequently ousted from Cameroon (Werner, 1969: 13). After the war, the British permitted Basel missionaries to return and fully operate in the British Cameroons. Expectedly, the activities of the Basel Mission were limited only to the British portion since they were prohibited from operating in French Cameroon (Lang, 2012: 55-60). The consequence of the concentration of Basel Mission's activities in British Southern Cameroons was that, the North West and South West² Regions of Cameroon eventually became the fief of the Basel Mission.

After evangelizing in Cameroon for over eighty years, the Basel Mission granted autonomy to an indigenous Church known as the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Initially, the Church limited its activities in the two Anglophone regions - North West and South West. This made the two regions to become the main centre of the PCC. Competition for administrative posts and the sitting of the church's amenities between the two regions was expected. During the immediate post-independence era, signs of an imminent crisis between the two groups were visible when the South Westerners expressed fears of their minority status in the church. From this moment, the dividing line between these Christians started to widen.

Besides, the fabrics of Basel Mission expansion in Southern Cameroons contributed in heightening ethno-regional awareness and in turn, triggered fears of domination among South Westerners. In planting their churches and amenities in the territory, Basel missionaries were more successful in the North West than in the South West, and this gave north westerners a numerical strength in the PCC (Werner, 1969). Worse still, most of the church's educational and health facilities were established in this region. Thus, Christians of North West origin were better placed to exercise more influence in the church than South Westerners. Furthermore, some ethnic groups in the

² The appellations North West and South West were products of the 1972 Referendum since it made Cameroon to be administratively divided into seven provinces.

North West like Bafut and Bali were largely favoured in the planting of churches and amenities. For instance, the Cameroon Protestant College and the Presbyterian Handicraft Centre were established in Bali Nyonga while Bafut was host to PCC's lone convent (Emmanuel Sisterhood), the Women's Training Centre, the Rural Training Centre and a prestigious high school. The special historical position of these ethnic groups, as *The Chronicle* confirms, placed the North West on the path to ascendancy in the PCC.³ By concentrating church planting and other social amenities (schools, hospitals, businesses, economic projects and the convent) in one region, Basel Mission authorities failed to see that they were laying a foundation for an eventual North West domination. Eventually, South Westerners received the numerical strength of the North West in terms of Christians, amenities and influence with a lot of indignation, forcing the Synod to deliberate their marginalization on numerous instances. Thus, a germ of differences between Presbyterians of the two English-speaking regions was laid.

Another contributory factor to the regional consciousness was Basel Mission's division of the church into two separate administrative units (Grassfields District and Forest District) in 1935 (Lang, 2012: 73). This move faded away the delicate spirit of unity that had hitherto existed in the church. Prior to this reform, the Church was simply divided into congregations. According to the new reform, each congregation was required to draw up its internal rules and regulations and send delegates to attend General Synod meetings. With the new dispensation, Christians of each region enjoyed internal autonomy in the management of their affairs. Each district had a Synod that met annually and took decisions affecting the Church in the area (Kah, 2012: 76). But it should be added that the districts sent delegates to the annual General Synod of the Church which held alternately in Buea and Bamenda. It was at this level that North West and South West Christians met to discuss issues affecting the entire church. Thus, the regional arrangement under which the PCC got its autonomy was perceived as a means of satisfying the desires of Christians of these regions to control their destinies while maintaining their affiliation to the central organ of the Church – the General Synod (Werner, 1969; 87). Unfortunately, this arrangement rather sharpened differences, widened ethnic cleavages and helped to sustain regional affinities because regional

³ *The Chronicle*, No. 114, 2007, p. 4.

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sensitivities freely mingled in the church's administration. The Synod Office simply became ceremonial in tone and profile.

According to Kah (2012: 76), the regional arrangement of the church resulted in aggravating differences between the South West and North West Christians. He cites missionary reports alleging that Christians of the South-West claimed superiority over those of the North-West. This was probably because South Westerners established contacts with Europeans long before North Westerners. However, the regional arrangement failed to do away with the suspicion between peoples of the two regions. In 1957 when the PCC was born, the two administrative districts were maintained, causing the PCC to inherit the North West/South West differences that existed in the Basel Mission.

Worse still, the development of the Church in these regions was not at the same pace. There were regional discrepancies in the provision of amenities (schools, health facilities and businesses) and the attribution of membership in the General Synod. This was probably because the Grassfields District that enjoyed a numerical strength in the General Synod apparently dictated the Church's decisions. Furthermore, the uneven patterns of development in the PCC followed regional lines and largely favoured the North West as earlier noted. Surprisingly, the questioning of such unequal relations by South West Christians was minimal in the 1950s and 1960s. This was probably because the highest post in the church (Moderator) was held by a South Westerner, Rev. Abraham Ngole from 1957 to 1969. Besides, another South Westerner, Rev. Essoka Diso, served as Chairman of the General Synod of the Basel Mission Church in Southern Cameroons (a post equivalent to that of moderator) from 1950 to 1957 (Dah, 2007: 43). Thus, South Westerners held the most senior position in the church for over nineteen years. During this period, North Westerners held the post subordinate to that of moderator. Rev. Aaron Su was the Vice Chairman of the General Synod from 1950 to 1957. When the post was renamed as "Synod Clerk", he held it up to 1964 when another North Westerner, Rev. J. C. Kangsen, replaced him (Dah, 2007: 18).

In 1968, in an effort to enhance unity between Christians of the two regions, the structure of the church was amended and the two districts abolished. The new ascending power structure now comprised Congregations, Presbyteries and a General Synod. This heightened the power tussle among Christians of the two regions. The following year,

1969, it was time for the aging Moderator, Rev. Ngole, to retire. The General Synod that met in April chose Rev. J. C. Kangsen from the northwest and Rev. Thomas Ediage from the southwest as Moderator and Synod Clerk respectively in a process void of any real election.⁴ Clearly, the two top-most positions were simply rotated between Christians of the two regions, and this was explained by Synod members as the beginning of power alternation. But the church's constitution was not amended to include this power alternation tradition, and this together with the increase in northwest dominance during the tenure of Rev. Kangsen placed the PCC on the path to an election crisis.⁵ Rev. Kangsen consistently appointed many North Westerners to key administrative positions, especially as district secretaries. Of the sixteen District Secretaries, only three were South Westerners.⁶ The Africa Secretary of the Basel Mission, Eberhardt Renz, drew Kangsen's attention to this marginalization of South Westerners, declaring that "the argument that out of the district secretaries only a few are Forest people, the others coming from the Grassfields, is not a new thing. This has been going on for years."⁷ Expectedly, North Westerners dominated the Synod and built upon it to promote their regional interests.⁸ South Westerners viewed such favouritism and dominance with dissatisfaction, and a little spark was enough to transform the suspicion into open crisis.

Taken together, the administrative division of the PCC into the Grassfields and Forest Districts, the location of most schools, businesses and health facilities in the North West Region and the consistent marginalization of South Westerners in PCC's governance structures combined to generate an atmosphere of suspicion and power tussles between north west and south west Christians. The idea of regional consciousness and marginalization developed among South Westerners, pushing them to be concerned

⁴ Minutes of General Synod Held in Victoria from 17-19 April 1969, File No. 5039, Presbyterian Church in Cameroon Central Archives Buea (PCCCAB). Indeed, South West delegates retired home with the understanding that one of them could only hold the post of Moderator upon Kangsen's retirement. When Kangsen and Ediage's four-year terms of office successively ended in 1973, 1977 and 1981, they were simply maintained in their posts without any elections.⁴ South Westerners did not challenge Kangsen's position since they did not present any candidate. This can be interpreted to mean that South Westerners were bent on respecting the unwritten rotation tradition. Thus, the clause of the constitution covering electoral procedures was silent for over sixteen years.

⁵ Letter of Samuel Kome to Kangsen (1985), 19 May, File No.3867, PCCCAB.

⁶ Letter of Samuel Kome to Moderator Kangsen (1985), p. 2. 19 May, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

⁷ Confidential Letter of Basel Mission's Africa Secretary, Eberhardt Renz, addressed to Rt. Rev. Kangsen (1985), 16 August, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

⁸ At this time (1980s), the North West had nine districts against seven for the South West. Consequently, the North West sent forty-eight delegates to the 1985 Synod against thirty-seven for the South West.

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with checking Northwest domination. With Rev. Kangsen striving to promote Northwest interest throughout his tenure from 1969 to 1985, South Westerners' last hope was the expected alternation of power at the Elective Synod Meeting slated for April 1985. But as things played out, the Elective Synod was marked by an unprecedented clash of regional power interests which almost ruined the church.

The Elective General Synod of April 1985

Holding in Bamenda from 15 to 18 April 1985 and attended by eighty-five delegates drawn from the North West and South West Regions, this General Synod had as main business the election of new administrative officials of the PCC, most notably the Moderator and Synod Clerk. It was a crucial Elective Synod because Kangsen, who had served as Moderator from 1969 to 1985, had openly announced his retirement, sparking off the question of his succession, which became the major debate on the eve of the gathering. South Westerners expected the rotation tradition which was used in 1969 to be strictly followed for one of their fellow man of God (preferably Rev. Ediage) to become Moderator. Contrary to this expectation, North West Christians were prepared to set a new pattern. They prepared Rev. Awasom as candidate for the post of Moderator and Rev. Dah for the post of Synod Clerk. This was an indication that North Westerners no longer had in mind the rotation tradition and were preparing for real elections as stated in the constitution. But the sustenance of the delicate balance of power between the two regions during the elections, according to South West Christians, required the pursuance of the unwritten rotation tradition of top posts and not the constitution.⁹

Chaired by Abraham Ndofor, the Synod started with a prayer that "God should give the PCC good leaders." The Chairman then informed delegates the written election procedure as provided in Article 46¹⁰ was to be strictly followed, thus keeping aside the unwritten power alternation tradition." The outgoing Synod Clerk, Rev. Thomas Ediage, who was expected to replace Kangsen expressed fears that secret meetings noticed since

⁹ There was the potential for any real election to be influenced by the number of delegates representing each region in the Synod. Indeed, the number of delegates in that election meeting represented a zone of comfort for the North West Christians. There were in all eighty-five delegates, with the North West having forty-eight against thirty-seven for the South West.

¹⁰ Article 46 of the 1978 Constitution stated that "the Synod shall elect the Moderator, the Synod Clerk and the Financial Secretary by secret ballot. The Synod Committee shall intimate names of candidates suitable for the various offices and the Synod may make other nominations."

the official opening of the Synod could place the church on a rough path.¹¹ In fact, North West delegates had held secret meetings on 16 and 17 April and chose Rev. Henry Awasom and Rev. Jonas Dah as candidates for the posts of Moderator and Synod Clerk respectively. On the election proper, two candidates were presented for the post of Moderator, Rev. Ediage of South West origin and Rev. Awasom of North West origin. Fearing the persistence of Northwest dominance, South West delegates rejected Rev. Awasom's candidature, arguing that it was a mismatch with the unwritten rotation tradition. They emphasized that real elections were to favour North Westerners because they were in the majority.¹² Committed to keep their leadership dominance, Northwest delegates frowned against any violation of the clause on electoral procedures.¹³ At this juncture, Ediage, with the backing of all thirty-seven South West delegates, threatened to decline his nomination arguing that power of attorney should be held by persons from North West Province and South West Province alternatively as had been the case since 1950.

Nevertheless, the Synod delegates concluded that real elections be held, and South Westerners received assurances that North Westerners were conscious of the necessity of power rotation. The main goal was to abide by the electoral procedure while hoping that North Westerners would understand and vote for the Southwest candidate. After a sustained prayer, the election took place with Awasom scoring forty-eight votes against thirty-seven for Ediage. South West delegates interpreted the results as a betrayal of the unwritten conventional rotation tradition by North Westerners. To buttress their point, they said that all forty-eight North West delegates voted for their candidate, stressing that all South West delegates voted for Ediage only in an effort to ensure power rotation. The already disturbing situation was accentuated by North Westerners when they presented a candidate, Rev. Dah, for the post of Synod Clerk. The two South West candidates for the post, Rev. Ediage and Rev. Osih, immediately declined their nominations probably because they felt cheated and regarded the North Westerners as being out to protect the interest of their region.¹⁴ After a secret ballot, all forty-eight North West delegates voted

¹¹ Rev. Thomas Ediage, Address to the General Synod as Outgoing Synod Clerk (1985), p. 2. 14 April, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Minutes of General Synod held in Bamenda from 14-18 April 1985, p. 21. File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

¹⁴ Minutes of General Synod held in Bamenda from 14-18 April 1985, p. 23. File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

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for the lone candidate, Dah. The implication was that, for the first time in the history of the PCC, the two top positions were held by persons from the same region (North West). Convinced that North Westerners were committed to defend their regional interest and maintain their dominance of the church's power structure, South Westerners threatened to break away from the PCC, causing it to be engulfed by a heat of smoldering discontent.

The Crisis

The controversial Elective Synod angered South Westerners as their delegates spread news about the violation of the rotation tradition which placed two North West sons at the helm of the Church. Gradually, the entire Christian community received the news of the election of the Church's brand new leaders as well the heightening of tensions and suspicion between Christians of both regions. Through meetings and sermons at the constituencies, South West delegates united their Christians in combating the marginalization of their region. With some degree of awareness attained, individual and collective protest letters were addressed to the Synod Office in Buea in which they rejected the outcome of the Synod elections. In his letter of 2 May 1985, Epie Njumbe accused Kangsen of upsetting the balance of authority by the outcome of the Synod election, stressing he failed to advise the members of Synod not to take schismatic decisions.¹⁵ Njumbe concluded the letter with this threat: "the crisis can lead to the disintegration of the church and the installation of two Moderators (one in the Forest area and the other in the Grassfields area) if adequate measures were not taken."¹⁶

The Tombel Parish (in Bakossi District) discussed the crisis during an Ordinary Session on 5 May 1985. During the meeting, Rev. Atoh provided an eyewitness account of the Elective Synod and explained how one female delegate from the South West walked up to Kangsen and remarked that "our hearts were white when we were coming for this Synod Meeting, but now they are as black as charcoal."¹⁷ With this account given and emotions heightened, the Tombel District resolved to nullify the elections and not to recognize the new officers.¹⁸ This followed by a chain of Congregational Session meetings, with each addressing a letter to the Tombel District Chairperson concurring

¹⁵ Letter by Epie Njumbe to Kangsen (1985), p. 2. 2 May, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Letter of Samuel Kome to Kangsen (1985), p. 2. 18 August, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

¹⁸ Letter of Samuel Kome to Kangsen (1985), p. 1. 19 May, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

with the nullification of the election. One of such letters was that of 19 May (titled “That Misguided Presbyterian Church Synod in Bamenda, 14th -18th April 1985”) written by the Session of the Tombel Congregation and signed by its Chairman, Samuel Kome. The letter emphatically noted that on leaving office, Rev. Ngole set a premise which under common logic, was a tone set for rotation of leadership in the PCC based on regional potentials. They maintained that the election of Revs. Awasom and Dah ran parallel to the status quo and saw no reason to recognize the new officers of the Church on grounds that the election and the circumstances lacked any spiritual or moral logic.¹⁹

Almost at the same time, the Kumba District held an emergency District Executive meeting on 14 May 1985 which resulted in a letter to the Moderator on 30 May. They bitterly regretted the distortion of the delicate balance of authority and enjoined the Synod Committee to take immediate measures to amend the constitution in such a way that the interest of the minority group (South West) be catered for.²⁰ Other protest letters with similar grievances and proposals came from the Bakossi District Executive and the Muebah Ninong Congregation.²¹ Overall, protest letters came from the Dikome, Bakossi and Kumba Presbyteries. While some of the letters requested a nullification of the elections and the convening of an Extraordinary Synod, some went as far as threatening secession to end the marginalization of the South West in the leadership structures of the Church. The threat of secession was supported by Christians in Tombel who called on the Session to suspend the remittance of money to the Church Treasury and work towards separation.²²

Expectedly, the foregoing protests were countered by some clerical authorities and Christians of these presbyteries who felt that the Bamenda Synod elections were constitutional. The first reaction came from Samuel Tiko Elanga, Vice Chairman of Dikome Presbytery. In a letter addressed to the Moderator dated 14 June 1985, Elanga dissociated Dikome Presbytery from the agitation against the Bamenda Synod election of Rev. Awasom and Rev. Dah as Moderator and Synod Clerk respectively. He went further to observe that delegates from Dikome Presbytery participated in the Bamenda Synod in

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Letter of J. Ekoko Chairman of Kumba District to Kangsen (1985), p. 1. 30 May, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

²¹ Letter of H. Ngane, Bakossi District Chairman to Kangsen (1985), 21 June, PCCCAB; Letter of Elias Ekwelle, Chairman of Muebah Congregation (1985), 25 June, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

²² Letter of Samuel Kome to Kangsen (1985), pp. 2-3. 19 May, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

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good faith, with clear understanding of the church's constitution. Describing promoters of the agitation as "misguided and selfish Christian elements", Elanga declared without equivocation:

Hence, any protest written against the said elections by any disgruntled and short-sighted element for, or on the behalf of Dikome Presbytery and the Ngolo-Batanga-Bima Missionary Area is condemned, and we completely distance ourselves from it. We earnestly and sincerely assure you of our faith in you, and you should count on us.²³

There was a similar reaction from Rev. Atoh and Simon Efokoa, Bakossi District Secretary and Treasurer respectively. In a 25 June circular, they referred to Kome's letter as unconstitutional on grounds that "Tombel Congregation has no right to circulate letters to all the congregations in the District, not to talk of the Presbyterian Church congregations."²⁴ The circular countered the claim that power was merely rotated between South Westerners and North Westerners during the 1969 Synod which permitted Rev. Kangsen to become Moderator. To the authors of this circular, Kangsen was unanimously elected as Moderator by all 53 delegates at the 17-19 April 1969 Synod. Concluding the circular, Atoh and Efokoa resolved to respect decisions reached at the Bamenda Synod and advised Christians to wave away the separation threats contained in Kome's letter. Surprisingly, one of the authors of this circular, Rev. Atoh, took part in the meeting that resulted in the 19 May letter in which he recounted what unfolded in the Synod as earlier noted. So, why did he suddenly change his stance? This was probably because he was an appointed official of the church (District Secretary) and feared that any opposition to the outcome of the Synod elections could cost him his position. Nonetheless, the circular was evidence that the unity expressed by South Westerners at the beginning of the crisis was fading. Troubled by the imminence of disintegration, the outgoing leaders of the Church took measures to arrest the crisis.

Resolution of the Crisis

After acknowledging the gravity of the situation and the imminence of disintegration, the outgoing Moderator convened an emergency Synod Exco meeting on 2 July 1985. At this meeting, the Moderator read the protest letters he had received and talked about how press reports criticized the disruption of power balance between the two regions. After

²³ Letter of Samuel Tiko Elanga on behalf of Dikome Presbytery, 14 June 1985.

²⁴ Rev. Atoh and Efokoa's Joint Letter to Kangsen (1985), 25 June, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

examining the situation, the Synod Executive found out that the elections were marred by numerous irregularities, stressing that the crisis was a product of the failure to prepare and intimate candidates for the election. The appointment of Ndofor, a non-Synod Committee member, to chair the Synod was also identified a major flaw. It was on the strength of these irregularities that the Synod Exco convened the Synod Committee to meet in an extraordinary session on 4-5 September 1985 to further examine the matter and to take appropriate action.²⁵

The outgoing Moderator was asked to manage the situation until the forthcoming Synod Committee meeting. On 6 July 1985, Rev. Kangsen addressed letters to chairpersons of Kumba and Bakossi districts relating to the discord. Widely circulated to all congregations, the letters reminded Christians that the Synod was the supreme governance organ of the church. In an apologetic tone Rev. Kangsen pleaded with Christians to accept part of the blame:

We cannot excuse ourselves for the unfortunate outcome of the recent Synod in which we took part. That two top offices are filled by people from the same province is most unfortunate and creates an unpleasant imbalance. As I have said the blame is all ours because we may have contributed to it in some ways. May the Lord forgive us all.²⁶

The Moderator, however, promised Christians that the Synod Committee would resolve the crisis in its forthcoming emergency meeting. Another letter was addressed to all PCC congregations in which the outgoing Moderator described Kome's letter as misleading, emphasizing that it was capable of "harming the whole Church and Kome himself."²⁷ When news of the circular got to Kome, he wrote to the Moderator on 22 July stating that he only signed the 19 May letter as Chairman of the congregation on behalf of the Session, as the Moderator equally does on behalf of all the organs of the PCC. The letter, among other things, renewed the secession threat and called on the Moderator to take appropriate action instead of circulating baseless letters.²⁸

With an urgent Synod Committee meeting looming, people who were happy about the leadership feared that the election results could be nullified to please the disgruntled

²⁵ Minutes of the Synod Committee Executive held at the Church Centre in Kumba on 2 July 1985, p. 4. File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

²⁶ Rev. Kangsen's Letter addressed to the Chairpersons of Kumba and Bakossi Districts on 6 July 1985, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

²⁷ Rev. Kangsen's Circular Letter to PCC Congregations (1985), 6 July, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

²⁸ Samuel Kome's Letter to Kangsen and PCC Christians on 22 July 1985, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

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South Westerners. They postulated that such a move could worsen the situation. For instance, Rev. Christopher Ekoichu informed the outgoing Moderator that the April Synod election was constitutional and warned that “if the Synod Committee is going to change anything, then all the decisions taken during that Synod be cancelled.²⁹” He reminded Rev. Kangsen that the new officers were chosen by God given that the delegates prayed shortly before the elections that God should give them good people to lead the Church.

During the Synod Committee meeting that held on September 4th and 5th 1985, various opinions were expressed in connection with the crisis. Kangsen presented the situation at hand to the committee and advised that the elections should not be nullified.³⁰ The Synod Committee then examined the issues, admitted the imminence of the church’s disintegration and remarked:

After lengthy and very serious discussions in which various opinions were expressed, members confessed that the preparation for the elections were sadly inadequate. Consequently, the results of the elections failed to reflect the regional balance of the church. This situation nearly risked the cherished unity of the church.³¹

This remark can be interpreted in various ways. By arriving at such a finding, the Synod Committee had recognized the existence of the unwritten rotation convention in the PCC. Besides, the remark was indicative of the Committee’s corroboration with the allegation that the unwritten tradition was violated at the Elective Synod. Little wonder it attributed the distortion of the regional balance to the poorly prepared elections.

In the light of the above remark, the Synod Committee resolved that the newly elected Moderator and Synod Clerk be allowed to serve their full term of office before any changes could be made in the next elections. As such, the committee charged the Constitution Committee to enshrine the power rotation clause in the constitution.³² Hoping that this resolution (signed by Kangsen and Ediage on behalf of the committee) would satisfy South Westerners, the committee called on Christians to accept the situation as it was and collaborate with the new officers. These resolutions were circulated and

²⁹ Letter by Rev. Ekoichu Christopher to Kangsen on 27 July 1985, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

³⁰ Rt. Rev. Jeremiah Kangsen, Address Delivered during the Synod Committee Meeting on 4 September 1985, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

³¹ Resolutions of Synod Committee Meeting Held in Kumba, 4-5 September 1985, File No. 3867, PCCCAB.

³² Ibid.

Synod officials toured congregations in an attempt to calm disgruntled Christians. In November 1985, Awasom and Dah were installed in their posts as Moderator and Synod Clerk respectively.

In 1988, the Constitution Committee, after a series of meetings, amended the famous article forty-six of the 1978 constitution covering electoral procedures for the post of Moderator and Synod Clerk. This was not only intended to check ethno-regional dissensions but also to facilitate the balancing and alternation of administrative power between the two regions. The amended article forty-six (renamed as article 112) read as follows “The Synod shall elect, by secret ballot, the Moderator and Synod Clerk. The Moderator and Synod Clerk shall not be indigenes of one and the same province of the country....³³” It was now clear that the current imbalance would be reversed in the forthcoming 1989 elections. Thus, the Synod Clerk was advised not to contest for the elections. Consequently, Rev. Nku of South West origin was nominated and elected as new Synod Clerk in April 1989.³⁴

Given that the constitution did not limit the number of terms for the posts of Moderator and Synod Clerk, the tradition of hanging onto power and quitting only at retirement was likely to persist. This could once more sway leadership to the monopoly of one region.³⁵ To avoid this dilemma, the Constitution Committee in 1998 enacted into the constitution a clause limiting the five-year term of office to two mandates³⁶. In April 1999 following Awasom’s retirement, the Synod elected Rev. Nku as Moderator while Rev. Festus Asana, a North Westerner, was elected as Synod Clerk. Later in 2009, leadership at the helm of the PCC was once more rotated between the two regions as Rev. Asana succeeded Nku as Moderator, while Rev. William Abwenzoh of Southwest origin assumed the office of Synod Clerk. In 2014, power was alternated again with Rev. Samuel Fonki from the South West and Rev. Babila George Fochang from the North West filling the positions of Moderator and Synod respectively. Since the 1985 election crisis therefore, the PCC remained faithful to the policy of power rotation between the two

³³ Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (1988), p. 31.

³⁴ *The Sunday Eden*, Vol. 1, No. 13, November 15-21, 2009, 20.

³⁵ For instance, Kangsen and Awasom (North Westerners) held the post of Moderator for sixteen and fourteen years respectively. So, North Westerners monopolized the post continuously for thirty years (1969-1999).

³⁶ Interview with Rev. Nyansako-ni-Nku, *The Sunday Eden*, Interviewed by Zachee Nzoh Ngandembou, 16 November 2009.

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regions. But in the face of current challenges, the question remains whether the regional divide can be permanently laid to rest.

Therapy for Greater Unity in the PCC

The persistent North West/South West divide in the PCC is symptomatic of a possible disintegration of the church in the future. It is in this light that this paper provides some recommendations capable of averting the dilemma of separation. First, the authorities of the church should always endeavour to follow the constitution that, for now, maintains the delicate balance and rotation of power between the two regions. This is because the PCC still bears all the trappings of any ordinary human congregation in which a diversion from the divine mindset is likely to step in (as was the case in 1985), bringing along with it bad faith in the selection process of successors. So, they should always emulate Nku by peacefully quitting office as provided by the constitution even at the height of their careers. Indeed, Rev. Nku had set a very good precedence for the church by strictly respecting the maximum two five-year terms rule in spite the pressure exerted on him to take a third term. This should therefore serve as an example to the present and future leaders of the PCC. Besides, the imbalance arising from the superiority in numbers of the North West Region is a permanent feature and should be factored into any solution to the constitutional problem.

Second, Church authorities need to stand above ethno-regional divides when taking decisions in domains like appointments and recruitments. It is worth highlighting that since the birth of the PCC, these highly educated church leaders have amazingly fueled the rift between the two regions by indulging in direct competition with each other. This confirms Gulliver's view that educated elite are the worst peddlers of "tribalism" and regionalism (Gulliver, 1969: 15). Thus, these educated elite should be the people leading the campaign against regional divides by sensitizing the less educated Christians. They need to set aside their ethno-regional interests so as to maintain the equilibrium and unity of the church.

Finally, the rotation clause enacted in the constitution in 1988 has the potential of provoking many other regional divides in the church. The inclusion of this clause was intended to check discord among Christians of the two regions. The leaders, in my opinion, were planting the seed of other dividing lines since the eight regions in the

French-speaking zone of Cameroon were not envisaged. The dilemma at hand is that the two top posts would always alternate between the North West and South West given that more than ninety-five per cent of PCC's Christians come from these regions. The regional interest lingering in the minds of these Christians cannot permit them to vote for a candidate from any of the Francophone regions aspiring for the top offices in spite the fact that the present constitution makes provision for Francophone Presbyterians to hold such positions. These Francophone Presbyterians who are in the minority would eventually challenge the present status quo just like South Westerners did in 1985. So, the authorities of the PCC should start reflecting on how to face this problem before it engulfs the Church. A further revision of the constitution, I believe, would guarantee the participation of Francophone Presbyterians in the leadership of the church. Indeed, there may be a need for an inviolable constitutional clause enshrining the alternating principle—a sort of “equality clause” safeguarding the South West and Francophone minority interests in the Church. This is the price to be paid for extending the PCC into the French-speaking areas of Cameroon.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the 1985 Synod Election crisis in the PCC, arguing that it was a manifestation of the entrenched divide between Northwest and Southwest members of the church. At the centre of this divide, which manifested during the election of top church officials in April 1985, were traits of ethnic and regional consciousness. The election crisis exposed the extent to which power struggles had roiled the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon by stalling internal cohesion and growth. This agrees with the consistent view in existing scholarship that the close identification of some Christians with their regions or ethnic communities promotes power struggles within Christian churches. Clearly, the regional consciousness harbored by Northwest and Southwest Christians triggered power struggles within the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, and this was a significant factor in the 1985 election crisis. Because of the crisis, the unity of the church was seriously threatened, with Southwest Christians clamoring for an autonomous church. The election crisis, as this paper demonstrates, exposed the extent to which North West/South West regional interest elbowed out collective concerns in the PCC; this placed the church, though united for the main time, in a fragile balance. Historically, North West/South West dichotomy has been the main factor in the power struggle and resultant tensions within

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the PCC. The authorities of the church have managed to maintain the delicate balance of authority between the two regions by attempting to eliminate the dominance enjoyed by North Westerners through constitutional reforms.

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