

Review

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Review

# “Biometricizing” Elections in Cameroon: Technology as Elections Cameroon’s Institutional Response to Governing Electoral Competition

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the introduction of biometrics in elections in Cameroon as an institutional response of the election management body (Elecam) to the multiple demands that have structured partisan political conflicts since the return to competitive democracy in 1990. Using approaches from constructivist sociology, public action (realist analysis), and the sociology of the logics of action, which have made it possible to develop a framework for interpreting the data collected through a triangulation of qualitative research techniques, it emerges that the operational mitigation of the results of the implementation of electoral biometrics in Cameroon is rendered intelligible by a factorial combination of the dynamics of appropriation of biometrics; In a field where the mobilization of the capital of actors orchestrates a configuration of action logics at the interface of the re-appropriation, endogenization and hybridization of a transnational electoral public policy.

**Keywords:** biometrics; electoral competition; election; Elecam; technopolitical reform

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## Introduction

On April 18, 2012, the Chief Electoral Officer and the representative of Giesecke & Devrient/Safe ID, the German technical partner chosen by the government, initiated contract documents relating to the implementation of the entire biometric voter registration system now in force at *Elections Cameroon* (Elecam), the election management body. A few months later, in December 2012, the two contracting parties proceeded with installation and initial functionality tests of the equipment at the National Center for Electoral Biometrics (NCEB) in Yaoundé. These facts materialize the recent dynamics of normative and, above all, technological transformations undertaken by the State of Cameroon, with the aim of reforming electoral competition in Cameroon since the return to competitive democracy in 1990. Just before the 2013 senatorial and municipal elections, the introduction of biometrics into the electoral process is considered to be the most innovative technopolitical reform of the last 30 years, in a context where the normative and institutional framework that had hitherto governed electoral competition was being challenged. Indeed, the debate on electoral malfunctions (low voter registration, ballot-box stuffing, abstentionism, manipulation of results, etc.) has been a recurring topic at the end of every election organised in Cameroon since 1992 (Eboussi Boulaga, 1998; Zambo Belinga, 2007; Owona Nguini, 2014a). The abundance of post-electoral disputes arising from each election in the era of political pluralism attests to this (Sindjoun, 1994). While the dysfunctions mentioned and their corollary, the contestation of results, are not specific to Cameroon, as demonstrated by studies that have observed these phenomena in old democracies (England, France, and the United States top the list of most frequently cited experiences.) (Quantin, 1998; Owen, 2007; Ben Mansour, 2017), it must be acknowledged that these practices continually raise the question of election governance and reform in the Cameroonian context. To remedy this situation, the state has equipped Elecam with biometric

technology. The use of this technology reflects a permanent quest for electoral certainty in a context marked by the *habitus* to contest electoral results. To this end, it has been observed since 2000 that biometrics has become the yardstick for democratic reform and modernity, materialising the rapid tidying-up of election management bodies on the African continent (Breckenridge, 2018).

The rapid development of the standardisation of biometrics as an ‘*all-purpose*’ political technology for electoral regulation in Africa in general, and in Cameroon in particular, as a solution to unsatisfactory legal and institutional reforms, has not left the scientific community indifferent. Indeed, a little over a decade ago, the introduction and profusion of technological objects in the electoral field sparked growing interest in the social sciences. This is particularly true for African biometrics. This dynamic has given rise to substantial scientific production materialized by a series of studies and research that proposes different paradigms of interpretation (Ndubueze, Nkume-Okorie & Chouin, 2011; Breckenridge, 2014; Debos, 2018). For the most part, these works focus on the making of the vote in Africa, placing its materiality as the epicentre of the analysis. In the case of Cameroon, literature on the implementation of biometrics in the electoral field is very scarce (Marzin, 2015; International Organisation of La Francophonie, 2012). Even rarer is research which, at a local level, questions the introduction of biometric technology into the electoral process because of its recent development in this political ecosystem. While there is an abundance of literature on the democratization process in Cameroon (Buijtenhuijs & Rijnierse, 1993; Buijtenhuijs & Thiriot, 1995), few works, on the other hand, take a specific interest in the material and technical processes that precede the act of voting and make it possible (Rader, 2016; Ehrhard & Bambade, 2020). From then on, this reflection is built around a central question: what are the socio-political factors which make up the introduction of biometrics into the process of regulating elections in Cameroon intelligible? We postulate that the introduction of biometrics into the electoral field was constructed on a political legacy of repeated challenges to election results as well as on the adoption of a transnational public policy based on constraints, both endogenous and exogenous, and technological advances that tend to nourish a political imaginary based on the *ethos of transparency*. This study aims to contribute to electoral sociology. It questions the "biometrisation" of elections in order to grasp the structural contributions, rationalities and socio-political stakes governing the adoption of this technology in the electoral system and process in Cameroon.

To make the introduction process of biometrics to the electoral regulation in Cameroon intelligible, it is relevant present the design and the methodology of this research. The latter took into account documentary research, semi-structured and in-depth interviews made with thirty-six (36) key informants (institutional and individual) in the implementation of this reform tool as shown in the table below.

1. Key informants involved in the biometric implementation reform

Category	Institution/Organization/Party
Government Institutions	Elecam, Ministry of Territorial Administration (MTA)
Ruling Political Party	Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM)
Allied Political Party	National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP)
Opposition Political Parties	Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM), Social Democratic Front (SDF), Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC), Cameroonian Party for National Reconciliation (CPNR)
Civil Society Organizations	“11 Million Citizens” Movement (MOMC), Citizen Dynamics (CD), National Service for Justice and Peace (NSJP) of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, Horizon-Femmes, “Un Monde Avenir”, Bayam Sellam Association of the Mfoundi market, Yaoundé Motorcycle Taxi Association

The collected data were analysed using qualitative data analysis of the Georgian phenomenological type (Corbière & Larivière, 2014).

## Cameroon: A Capture of Political Landscape

Cameroon is located in Central Africa, at the crossroads between West and Equatorial Africa, and covers an area of 475,650 km<sup>2</sup>. It shares borders with Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea. The country features a wide range of geographical landscapes, including coastal zones, savannas, mountains, and equatorial forests. Administratively, it is divided into 10 regions. Its population is estimated at approximately 28 million inhabitants in 2024, comprising more than two hundreds of ethno-linguistic groups.

Cameroon offers a particularly rich case for political sociology, especially in the study of hybrid regimes and authoritarian configurations in postcolonial contexts. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has exhibited a strong centralization of state power, embodied in the remarkable political longevity of President Paul Biya, who has remained in office since 1982. This prolonged incumbency illustrates a neopatrimonial logic in which leadership is based as much on the personalization of power as on the extensive control of state institutions and public resources. Although multiparty politics was reintroduced in 1990 under significant domestic and international pressure, the political field remains heavily dominated by the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), with opposition forces structurally marginalized.

In this configuration, the multiparty system introduced in 1990 has evolved into a superficial pluralism, characterized by the proliferation of political parties (over 300 officially registered as of 2020), the majority of which have only marginal territorial and electoral presence. The political landscape is polarized between a dominant bloc — the RDPC, with a dense territorial network and substantial administrative resources — and a fragmented opposition centered around parties such as the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC), and the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC), which has emerged as a major protest force since 2018. In terms of territorial coverage, the RDPC is present in all regions, often down to the village level. The opposition, meanwhile, is concentrated in large urban centers and in certain parts of the Centre, West, and Littoral regions, but suffers from limited access to rural areas and electoral administration.

From this perspective, the electoral reforms introduced in the early 2010s—most notably the adoption of biometric voter registration in 2013—should be interpreted less as efforts toward democratization and more as strategies of regime legitimation. Officially framed as a technological innovation aimed at curbing electoral fraud, the implementation of biometric cards and computer-based registration was managed by Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), a body widely perceived as lacking independence from the executive. This reform sparked intense public debate: some saw it as a modernization of electoral governance, while others criticized it as a technocratic mechanism for reinforcing state control over political selection processes. It exemplifies how electoral governance tools can simultaneously become objects of contestation and instruments for the reproduction of dominant political orders. Two main points structure the developments that follow. The first historicises political-electoral crises and their reforms. The second looks at the forces behind technopolitical reform in the Cameroonian context.

### I. Historicising electoral reforms in Cameroon since 1990

This paper revisits the history of political and electoral crises and the institutional and normative reforms that have taken place in the electoral field in Cameroon. Based on the historical sociology of the state, it is possible to understand electoral reforms in the political sphere as historically constructed through the multiple dynamics that have shaped Cameroonian political society and recently served as a breeding ground for the introduction of biometrics. The main historical sequence covered by this retrospective investigation extended from 1990 to 2021. In this sense, two main sequences are considered to account for the way in which political and electoral crises have shaped the emergence of successive reforms in the electoral field in Cameroon.

#### I.1 Political and electoral crises began with the vote



Voting is considered to be the most widespread form of social regulation in contemporary society. It appears to be the one of the best rituals for arbitrating political competition and therefore avoids the use of violence in the settlement of political antagonism for the conquest of power in the age of democracy. Without denying the existence of violence as a modality of social interaction structuring interparty relations in the political arena, we note that it is disqualified in the microcosm of so-called democratic societies. Therefore, preserving social peace is one of the challenges of social regulation through elections. However, despite this normative approach to the role of elections in today's societies, it can be seen from the way in which elections have often been conducted that violence is a permanent variable which structures the practice of voting in the Cameroonian context (Ngono, 2000). It should be briefly emphasised that the electoral violence to which we refer here is understood as all overt or symbolic actions that run counter to the electoral practice that is regularly and legally prescribed within a state. It takes the form of political actions that are fundamentally opposed to the peaceful, free exercise of the right to vote, thereby undermining respect for norms that govern the process of devolving power.

Historically situated events illustrate electoral violence in Cameroonian politics as an unfinished social form of the institutionalisation of the vote. They were rooted in the country's political history during the period known as the return to political pluralism, which began in 1990. At that time, the people of Cameroon were infected by the hiccups of democratisation and showed their commitment to moving towards greater freedom by turning their backs on the political monolithism that had prevailed until then. The immediate consequence of this dynamic is the restructuring of the political field, which once again accepts pluralism and political competition as the main modalities for organising the electoral game and the conquest of power. Political history teaches us that it was to this wind of democratisation that we owe the first reforms of the cameroonian electoral system and the organisation of the elections that are often described as 'founding' in 1992. This partially explains the explosion of political and particularly electoral violence which occurred during that period between the ruling party, which was forced to experiment political otherness, and the new opposition parties backed up by civil society organisations pressing for change.

Political violence can take many forms. It can be seen, among other things, in the organisation of civic disobedience operations known as 'dead cities', marches to contest the results of the 1992 presidential election, open confrontations between demonstrators and the forces of law and order, vandalism of public buildings, and requests for the organisation of a sovereign national conference. However, there is also an ethno-community divide in the political debate and inflation of verbal violence in the confrontation between candidates in various elections between the opposition political parties and the political elite in power. To varying degrees, this electoral violence has permeated the organisation of elections from the 'rebirth of the multiparty system' (Mandeng, 2017:13) in Cameroon to the recent presidential election of 2018. The most recent episode in the materialisation of this electoral violence was the pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral confrontation between Maurice Kamto's CRM, officially declared the runner-up following the publication of the results with 14.23%, and Paul Biya's CPDM, declared the winner with 71.28% of the votes cast. The highly contested nature of this election also highlights the inflationary use of violence during the three traditional sequences that mark the temporality of each election.

This violence first took the form of a pre-electoral confrontation during the period when people were being made aware of the need to register to vote in the neighbourhoods and streets of Yaoundé. This symbolic and verbal violence then crystallised on social networks (Facebook) through the exacerbation of tribal passions between CRM supporters and CPDM supporters. The election day itself also saw violent incidents in some Yaoundé polling stations. The post-election period was marked by an appeal to the Constitutional Court. Having lost its case before the Constitutional Court, this political party resorted to violence as a form of political expression, calling for street marches that were banned by the administrative authorities in Yaoundé and Douala. The violation of these bans on demonstrations led to a confrontation with the forces of law and order in Douala and the arrest of the organisers of the said marches. The climax of this post-election violence was reached

with the arrest of more than a hundred members of the CRM, including its president Maurice Kamto, in Douala on 29 January 2019. Paradoxically, this unprecedented occurrence in Cameroon's political context comes at a time when biometric reform is being introduced in Elecam with the aim of making the electoral process more transparent and peaceful. These facts illustrate the experience of violence as a phenomenon pegged to the organisation of electoral competition in Cameroon. The recurrence of violence in the electoral field can thus be considered the main factor which, since 1990, explains the electoral reforms produced to date, of which biometrics is the most recent.

## **I.2 From MTA to Elecam: the political construction of the image of a reforming state**

Over the past 30 years, Cameroon has witnessed a remarkable electoral reform process, including normative, institutional, and technological reforms, with the recent introduction of biometrics in the Elecam as a new method of registering voters on the electoral roll. More specifically, we shed light on the nature and different temporalities through which the transformation of the norms governing the regulation of the electoral field takes place. They are the result of a balance of power that characterises the interplay between the governing order and the social forces emerging as a result of the democratisation of the political field. In practical terms, it shows how important socio-political changes have been operationalised, including the transfer from the Ministry of Territorial Administration, which has had a monopoly on the organisation of elections since 1990, to Elecam, an autonomous institution in charge of organising elections in Cameroon since 2006, via the National Elections Observatory (NEO), an elections supervisory body created in 2000. These changes are reflected in the implementation of a series of reforms of various kinds, focusing on political, legal, organic, and institutional aspects.

Political reforms here refer to changes in the political environment within which democracy must henceforth operate. They refer to the establishment of a new political order. More precisely, it is a question of transformations in Cameroon's political ecosystem to bring it into line with the new requirements that the adoption of a new political system entails. In this sense, the newly introduced rules were intended to induce democratic behaviour on the part of the political elites in power, the contentious social forces and the nascent political opposition, as well as on the part of citizens. The implementation of new reforms intended to reconfigure the political landscape had thus become an issue in the day-to-day interactions of the main protagonists. The recent history of this political episode shows that the adoption of democracy, as a new mode of government, was fundamentally the major political reform insofar as it played a configurationist and (re)structuring role in the political order in Cameroon (Abé, 2014). Even if, in some respects, the return of democracy to Cameroon and more widely to sub-Saharan Africa has favoured the development of a current of thought supporting the thesis of a process of 'authoritarian decompression' (Bayart, 1991) materialized by a democratic transition that did not take place (Mehler, 1997), to the detriment of the opening up of a truly competitive political market, the fact remains that democracy brought about real social change in this country, which ushered in an era of unprecedented political practices (Bourgi & Casteran, 1991; Monga, 1995; Galloy & Gruénais, 1997). The relationship with elections, the monistic conception of power, and the structuring of the state are all ways of thinking and acting in politics that were affected by the changes that followed. This reconfiguration of the political environment has also led to legal reforms.

The legal reforms referred to here concern the enactment of laws, that is, amendments to the general rules organising the electoral devolution of political power. More specifically, we are interested in the way in which the new electoral legislation has taken shape by restructuring the legal framework and rules that organise political competition. These changes can be observed from their reflection on the behaviour of political actors in the electoral scene in Cameroon, reflecting the implementation of new ways of doing politics. Thus, beyond the fact that democracy is considered to be the epicentre of the global reforms that will emerge in the socio-political field in Cameroon, the organisation of the 'Tripartite' conference, instead of a sovereign national conference demanded by

the opposition, is the major political event that marks the original source of the legal reforms that will subsequently govern political competition in Cameroon.

The Constitution occupies a primordial place in the hierarchy of legal norms. This is why the opposition and civil society, who were invited to consult with the government, are demanding that it be revised. Referring to Abdoukarimou (2010) who revisits the practice of elections in Cameroon 1992-2007, it is possible to say that the 'Tripartite' gave birth to the first laws on elections in the era of pluralist democracy. Issues relating to the structure responsible for organising elections, the voting system, and political parties' access to public service audiovisual media were discussed during these negotiations. At the end of these discussions, compromises were reached, giving rise to what can now be regarded as the 'first generation' legal reforms on pluralist elections in Cameroon. What we retain from these discussions, what was later called the 'Yaoundé Declaration', is that, with the help of the authoritarian habitus, the administration remained at the heart of the organisation of elections, thus privatizing the mechanisms for devolving power. These dynamics also account for the disparate nature of the texts organising elections in Cameroon despite organic or institutional reforms.

Organic or institutional reforms, on the other hand, involve the creation of new structures tied to the implementation of democracy through the preservation of guiding principles such as neutrality, transparency, impartiality, and the integrity of the electoral process. Put differently, this involves making visible the institutions tasked with concretely translating these new values and principles, which these structures are called upon to defend. The need to establish an independent and autonomous body responsible for organizing elections became evident in the early years of the democratic era in Cameroon. This became one of the main demands of opposition political parties, alongside certain civil society organisations such as the Cameroonian Organization for the Defense of Human Rights (CODHR) and Human Rights Watch (HRW). This demand was based on the notion that the organization of elections—long monopolized by the administration during the era of political monolithism and widely suspected of collusion with the ruling power—should, in this period of liberal democracy, be entrusted to an independent actor. The idea advocated here is that the establishment of this independent body should be capable of fostering consensus among competing political parties around the values of neutrality, impartiality, and authenticity in the electoral processes that frame political competition (Diarra, 2000).

The institutional transformations observed in this regard, through successive entities such as the National Elections Observatory (NEO) and Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) in the case of Cameroon, aim to consolidate democracy internally by establishing a solution that isolates an autonomous body within the State administration capable of fulfilling this role. In retracing the history of electoral reforms, it is important to note that the creation of NEO as an independent body in charge of supervising elections did not occur without challenges. The political elite in place relied heavily on authoritarian remnants despite the advent of a new political framework (Bigombe Logo & Menthong, 1996). This transformation of the institutional landscape led, for the first time, to the intervention of the Constitutional Council in publishing the electoral results of the 2018 presidential elections in Cameroon. Furthermore, the nature of the various aforementioned texts aligns with successive temporalities that reflect, in a specific way, the shifts in governance practices concerning the "transformations" of the electoral field.

Looking back at the dynamics of normative transformations in electoral governance in Cameroon since 1990, a deeper analysis reveals how, through the frequent production of these legal and institutional norms, the ruling political elite navigates the dynamics pushing for a transformation of the normative framework that regulates electoral competition in Cameroon. This takes place in a political space still constrained and marked by the ongoing weakening of critical forces, despite the return to political pluralism. This situation raises questions about the reformatory scope of technological transformations in the management of elections in Cameroon.

## II. Reforming Elections Through Technology or Constructing a Political Imaginary Rooted in the Ethos of Transparency and Modernity

In the 2010s, Cameroon, like numerous other African nations, implemented digital technologies to enhance the integrity of its electoral system, particularly through the computerization of the electoral register and the introduction of biometric methods, as manual procedures were criticized for undermining credibility. It is essential to acknowledge that the primary determinants influencing the adoption of biometric technology in Cameroon are threefold: the escalating internationalization of public policy solutions, the necessity for the modernization of electoral public administration, and the establishment of "transparency" and "sincerity" in elections as key values legitimizing the implementation of biometrics as an electoral public policy pertinent to Elecam.

## **II.1 What does biometrics signify?**

Cameroon, like other nations globally, influenced by the emerging paradigms of digital capitalism, has recently witnessed a swift proliferation of biometric technologies, which encompass applications ranging from personal identification to the surveillance of spaces and territories. Corresponding with its applications, over the past two decades, the progression of biometric technologies has permeated the domain of democratic practices, particularly within sub-Saharan Africa, where such technologies have been integrated into electoral processes with the intention of modernizing them, thereby affording states an opportunity to enhance transparency and foster trust in electoral mechanisms (Perrot, Pommerolle, & Willis, 2016). In order to elucidate the focus of this section, which seeks to define biometrics, we commence by positing that it may be perceived as a purely technical apparatus. Subsequently, we illustrate that this digital technology may also be interpreted through the lens of a public electoral policy enacted by the State.

### **II.1.1 An Identification and Authentication Technology**

The scholarly literature on the subject (Lascoumes, Callon & Barthe, 2001; Ceyhan, 2006; Ceyhan & Piazza, 2011) characterizes biometrics, in its broadest definition, as a comprehensive methodology aimed at establishing an individual's identity through the measurement of specific physical characteristics. Consequently, it stands as a technology facilitating the identification or authentication of individuals based on recognizable and verifiable data unique to them. In recent years, biometrics has increasingly been employed as a benchmark instrument by governments to ensure security, trust, and transparency in the electoral process. Specifically, Ceyhan (2006: 2) defines biometrics as:

"An identification and authentication technique that involves the transformation of a person's biological, genetic, and behavioral attributes, such as fingerprints, iris patterns, retinal scans, voice, facial shapes, and hand geometry, into a digital fingerprint. Derived from the Greek "bios" (life) and "metron" (measurement), this technique enables the quantification of living entities based on physical attributes considered immutable. Thus, identity is encapsulated within the physical and genetic characteristics that affirm an individual's uniqueness."

To this technical characterization of biometrics, it is imperative to incorporate aspects that are particularly relevant from a strictly sociological analytical perspective, which seeks to comprehend biometrics within the electoral domain.

### **II.1.2. Understanding Biometrics Through the Lens of Electoral Public Policy**

Electoral public policies are often defined by comparison with general public policies. In this sense, they are characterized as a set of concrete measures and decisions that mobilize a general framework of action, a target audience, and specific goals or objectives to be achieved (Mény & Thoenig, 1989; Ehrhard, 2015; 2016). Specifically, electoral public policies encompass electoral laws, technical considerations related to voting procedures, the creation of electoral maps, and the definition of the electorate, among other elements. Because of their function, electoral public policies are qualified as constitutive, regulatory, and/or redistributive in nature (Hassenteufel, 2011). Indeed, they contribute to the creation or modification of the institutional and normative framework that governs the actors within the electoral field as a whole (Ehrhard, 2016).



From this perspective, by operationalizing biometrics in the electoral domain, it becomes evident that it primarily intervenes in the identification of voters during the creation or correction of the electoral register through the use of electoral kits, and subsequently on election day through voter recognition. This is achieved via a so-called biometric voter card, which typically includes a photograph, biographical information, a fingerprint, and a unique barcode for each voter. In theory, this system eliminates multiple voting and upholds the sacred democratic principle of "one person, one vote."

Adopting Ceyhan's conceptualization of biometrics previously discussed, we approach biometrics additionally as a state-driven project. In this perspective, it can be understood as a public policy, defined as "an action connected in one way or another to a public authority (or authorities) aimed at transforming a situation perceived as problematic" (Lascoumes, 2014: 2). Ultimately, biometrics emerges as an instrument in the sense described by Lascoumes & Le Galès (2004: 13), namely, "a device that is both technical and social, organizing specific social relations between public authority and its recipients based on the representations and meanings it carries" (Lascoumes & Le Galès, *ibid.*). This conceptualization clearly demonstrates that biometrics, beyond being a technical tool, establishes a framework that structures the way voting is conducted, or even produced. Consequently, it inevitably conveys a new interpretative framework for electoral practices in Cameroon.

## II.2 Biometrics at Elecam: Between the "Self-Concern" of a Neo-Patrimonial State and the Permanent Control of Electoral Order as Political Rationality

In light of the arguments developed so far, it is important to draw lessons from the trajectory of electoral system reform policies in Cameroon since the early 1990s. Specifically, we highlight the tension between, on the one hand, the necessary transformation of the normative framework governing electoral competition triggered by this period of political transition, and on the other hand, the appropriation of biometric reform through the particular orientation of its implementation by the ruling political elite. Viewed from this perspective, we posit that a significant trend emerges: the ruling political elite, in its efforts to appropriate the requirements of enforcing democratic rules in the electoral domain, once these rules are formally established in various frameworks, has instead utilized them as instruments to consolidate its power.

This political rationality, embodied in the ruling elite's persistent desire to maintain control over the mechanisms of power transfer, has thus developed over time. It can be conceptualized through a key analytical category that informs this reflection, which we term the "self-concern" of a neo-patrimonial state. This conceptualization is informed by a theoretical concern: to modestly respond to Ela's (2001) call for an epistemological challenge that compels African researchers to invent relevant analytical and conceptual tools tailored to their objects of study and research contexts. However, this formulation can, for explanatory purposes, be broken down into a dual perspective. The first revisits Bézes' conceptualization of the "self-concern of the state," from which it draws inspiration, while the second focuses on the role attributed to reforms in a neo-patrimonial state such as Cameroon.

### II.2.1 Electoral Biometrics, or the "State's Self-Concern" in a Neo-Patrimonial Context

To better structure our analysis, it is worth pausing momentarily on the paradigm of the "State's self-concern." Drawing on a concept from Foucault (1984), the "care of the self," Bézes (2002), in his dissertation titled *Governing the Administration. A Sociology of Administrative Reform Policies in France (1962-1997)*, constructed an analytical framework to explain the reformist activity of the contemporary state, which he termed the "State's self-concern." In summary, this concept refers to a specific "art of the state" – a particular way of governing the administration through administrative reforms, which, with the rise of the neo-managerial state, manifests as a "new attention that rulers must pay to the inner workings and mechanisms of the administrative apparatus and to their visibility" (Bézes, 2009: 72). This mixture of representations, practices, and administrative reform

programs, which specifically focuses on the French case, approaches administrative reform through three dimensions.

First, administrative reform is seen as “a discursive and publicized form of the contemporary state,” meaning a form of state reflexivity regarding itself, particularly in relation to its mode of functioning and organization – corresponding to the cognitive or intellectual dimension of reform. Second, reform is viewed as “a differentiated organizational form constructed and structured within the state around social groups and through political-institutional games that give it substance” (Bezes, *ibid.*). This involves collective political and administrative entities (ministries and various state structures) that interact to materialize reforms, reflecting the professional and institutional dimension of reform. Finally, reform is seen as “one of the (more or less effective) modalities for state transformation” (Bezes, *ibid.*), implying a political dimension to reform. In summary, the “State’s self-concern,” as conceptualized by its author, characterizes the attitude developed by the state, through senior officials, to make the administrative apparatus more efficient through administrative reforms. Administrative reform thus becomes one lens through which the formation of the contemporary state can be understood. According to its author, these brief considerations suggest that the phenomenon of administrative reform, present in most countries, should be analyzed exclusively as a set of initiatives and procedures aimed at remedying the dysfunctions of the administrative apparatus and positively transforming its bureaucratic form (Bezes, 2009). This position aligns with the analysis of the rationality of state activities in a Western context.

Contrary to this perspective, which could be described as an essentialist or ontological conception of administrative reform as formalized by Bezès, we may question whether this analytical framework exhausts the interpretations and meanings that can be attributed to reform activities undertaken by states in Africa. This perspective becomes necessary when considering the epistemological debates about the genesis of the state in Africa, one of the key extensions of which is the crucial distinction between its formation and/or construction. This operational distinction, made by Berman & Lonsdale (1992), underpins various approaches to the concept of the state and is summarized by Bayart (1996). Bayart explains that the notion of state construction refers to the deliberate creation of a political control apparatus, whereas state formation refers to a historical, involuntary, and largely unconscious process of conflict, negotiation, and constant compromise between different groups. This analytical perspective, which examines the genesis of the state in Africa through the lens of the grafting of an imported state (Badie, 1992; Meny, 1993), emphasizes the features related to its formation. This process gives a minority of local actors the historical opportunity to exploit the newly created institutions to their advantage, a phenomenon they term the vulgarization of power.

It is within this framework that we outline the meaning of what we call the “self-concern of the neo-patrimonial state.” Through this somewhat laborious expression, we test the hypothesis that it is possible to analyze the social phenomenon of electoral administration reform in the Cameroonian context through the paradigm of instrumentalization, or even its transformation into a political resource mobilized by the ruling elite. This conception, coupled with a contextualized appropriation of reform by political leaders, clearly stands in opposition to its original conception. In the Cameroonian context, this reform manifests more as a concern for control and mastery, primarily for political purposes – namely, the preservation of power. This is in stark contrast to the original paradigm, which emphasizes the rationalization of public action as the driving force of reform. The implementation of reforms in the electoral field in Cameroon since the 1990s suggests a causal relationship between the timing of reforms and their nature, on the one hand, and the relatively lukewarm reception by other political actors, on the other.

The analytical lens through which this perspective can be tested in the Cameroonian context is supported by the following observation: reforms in Cameroon, whether related to the functioning of the administration in general or specifically addressing the electoral process, bear the hallmark of the President of the Republic and are therefore initiated exclusively by him. The powers granted to him by the Constitution, combined with his status as the national president of the ruling CPDM party,

make him the sole political actor who wields such concentrated power. From this hegemonic position, electoral reform is often used by this actor as a “toolkit” to alleviate political tensions in this crisis-prone space. In this visibly stagnant politico-administrative context, where any initiative toward administrative reform is undertaken “on the very high instructions of the head of state,” this explains why electoral reforms are administered in homeopathic doses. In Cameroon, the president of the Republic remains, to date, the sole actor who fully controls the reform agenda, whatever its nature (Gicquel & Gicquel, 2005). Thus, while administrative reform has become institutionalized within the state as a new way of acting on and through the administration – initiated in Cameroon in the aftermath of independence (Tamekou Tsowa, 2017) – over time, it has also taken on a distinct form of instrumental managerialism, particularly in the realm of electoral reform.

### **II.2.2 Biometrics: A Technological Response Anchored in a Political Rationality of Electoral Order Maintenance**

When examining administrative reform as a social phenomenon, it is important to note that the vocabulary of “modernization,” or the more politically charged terminology of “Renewal” often associated with it in the Cameroonian context, does not necessarily imply a transformation of administrative practices. Instead, it often refers to how those speaking on behalf of the state instrumentalize such reforms to preserve or expand hegemonic positions within the politico-administrative apparatus. Drawing specifically on the historical facts surrounding electoral reforms in Cameroon, one can observe that a key feature governing political rationality in this domain is the mobilization of reform as a political resource to “create power or redistribute it” (Bezes, 2009).

This political usage of reform was illustrated in the aftermath of President Paul Biya’s ascension to the highest office, when he divided the northern province of the country into three regions (Adamawa, North, and Far North), thereby increasing the number of provinces in Cameroon from seven to ten. Politically, it is difficult to suggest that such a move was not rooted in strategy and political calculation. The objective at that time was clearly to redistribute power among the political elite of that region and, consequently, to redraw the electoral map with the creation of new constituencies. This approach strongly indicates that the initiator’s goal was to foster loyalty among the emerging political elite native to this region of the country.

Beyond this mobilization of the neo-patrimonial state’s self-interest as an explanatory perspective for how the state employs instrumental managerialism in the electoral field, these reforms can also be analyzed through the lens of material and symbolic gains tied to the historical and political construction of the neo-patrimonial state in Cameroon.

This focus on intelligibility may indeed be complemented by considering the weight of the neo-patrimonial ethos that underpins electoral reforms in Cameroon. In this regard, it is worth recalling that Cameroon, in the Africanist literature, is classified among political regimes characterized by three essential structural properties: the first is hegemonic-administrative (Le Vine, 1980; 2004), the second is neo-patrimonial (Médard, 1977; Van de Walle, 1994; Awono, 2012), and the third is extractive (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Without delving too deeply into the debates surrounding the nature of the works dedicated to these issues, it is broadly accepted that these various adjectival forms describe a state in which the administration, as one of its principal appendages, occupies a preeminent position over other social bodies. The administration thus becomes the primary site for the exercise of state authority and domination, as well as for the institutionalization of a rent-based system in the relationship between the state and society.

Under these labeled forms, the Cameroonian administration, beyond fulfilling core public interest missions that identify it as the principal provider of public services, maintains relationships of subordination and allegiance with political power. In a context where “the state is the administration; [and] the administration is the state” (Tamekou Tsowa, 2017: 301), it becomes easier to understand the dependency and entanglement that characterize the relationships between these two entities, which, in the Cameroonian context, drive the entire social dynamic.

By analyzing biometric electoral reform as a means of examining the relationships between the state and the electoral administration, this perspective highlights the influence of the ethos of the patrimonial state, whose primary characteristic is making the administration the principal means of accessing state resources. These resources, in turn, constitute the very foundation of political power.

## Conclusion

This reflection aimed to provide an analytical perspective on the technopolitical reform process materialized by the introduction of biometrics into the electoral sphere in Cameroon. It sought to examine the mechanisms behind the ongoing technological transformation, which represents Elecama's institutional response to the various forms of contestation surrounding election results that the contemporary Cameroonian State continues to face. The ambition of this undertaking was to demonstrate that the biometric reform introduced into the electoral field could be understood as historically constructed through the multiple and singular dynamics that have shaped Cameroonian political society and have progressively paved the way for the advent of biometrics in this Sub-Saharan African country. From this perspective, particular attention was paid to the political trajectories of electoral reforms initiated by the authorities, analyzed through their historicity. This historicity made it possible to account for the specific ways in which the state, under the driving force of historical contingencies such as the democratization of its political space starting in 1990 and the digital technology revolution shortly thereafter (2000), has been reconfigured. This historicist approach thus revealed the convergence of "internal dynamics," materialized by the struggles of a nascent democracy, with "external dynamics," concretely expressed through the phenomenon of globalization in an international context of intensifying global social relations.

The lessons that can be drawn from this sociohistorical analysis of electoral reforms are primarily twofold. First, by studying the social and political context within which the genealogical process of electoral reforms unfolded, this sociological approach allowed us to uncover how these reforms were constructed. It is, therefore, not, as one might assume, a self-evident process of reconfiguring both social and mental structures. This moment of historicizing electoral reforms brought to light "choices" (whether arbitrary or not) leading to strategic objectives of power retention pursued by the state, and particularly by those holding political power. Second, it demonstrates, through the interactive dynamics between the state and other social groups, that the reforms undertaken are not solely dependent on historical contingencies and uncertainties presented as the sole explanatory factors, to which these various actors would passively and ordinarily conform. This convergence, which illustrates the persistence of a neo-patrimonial ethos in the way electoral reform is driven by the state in Cameroon, reveals what can be considered as idiosyncratic specificities of a unique cultural, historical, and political context. The way Cameroonians receive and perceive reforms in the electoral sphere is deeply influenced by the construction and development of a habitus shaped by the enduring ethos of self-preservation typical of a neo-patrimonial state, which, in essence, creates the impression of legislating without truly reforming.

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