

Review Article

## The 1959 Regime Change in the British Southern Cameroons: The Role of the Female Electorate

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**Abstract:** In 1959 the British Southern Cameroons witnessed a peaceful political transition as the opposition Kamerun National Democratic Party defeated the ruling Kamerun National Congress in the general elections. As a result, J. N. Foncha took over the premiership of the territory from E.M.L. Endeley. This was the first democratic regime change in Africa south of the Sahara and it was also the first time women were granted the franchise in this British administered UN Trust Territory. Using primary and secondary data, this paper attempts an investigation into the reasons for the enfranchisement of women and the importance of the first female votes in this territory. The findings revealed that the victory of the opposition was largely determined by this newly enfranchised electorate who had a number of grievances against the incumbent regime. It can therefore be concluded that Endeley's premature political demise was the handiwork of the female electorate who were predominantly anti-Igbo and pro-reunification unlike Endeley. Women therefore contributed in no small way to Foncha's victory and this confirms the view that the female votes are always decisive in most crucial elections.

**Keywords:** Female Electorate, Southern Cameroons, Regime change, 1959 elections.

### INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND

In 1916, Britain and France partitioned German Kamerun following the defeat of Germany in Kamerun during the First World War. Britain received one-fifth of the territory and decided to divide her tiny territory into two portions, British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. The two portions were administered as integral parts of Northern and Eastern Nigeria respectively. The Southern Cameroonians after experiencing German rule in one polity with French Cameroonians from 1884 to 1916, therefore became part of Nigeria governed by the British through Indirect Rule which valorized the chieftaincy institution and preserved the culture of the indigenous people.

After the Second World War, the nationalists in the British Southern Cameroon were divided between gaining independence with Nigeria and reunifying with French Cameroon as was the case before 1916. The advocates of independence with Nigeria led by E M L Endeley argued that it was senseless to leave the superior British way of life that favoured decentralisation and the preservation of local values for the French system which ignored local customs and traditions and emphasized the assimilation of Africans. They also took advantage of the UPC rebellion in French Cameroon to complain of chaos and instability in the territory [1]. On the other hand, the advocates of reunification with French Cameroon complained of Igbo domination and exploitation of the Southern Cameroon concluding that it was better to reunite with French Cameroon. They were greatly influenced by the "Kamerun Idea" and the financial and moral support they received from the immigrants from French Cameroon and the official of French Cameroon.

The different ideologies were represented by political parties. The pro-Nigerians were represented by the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) with Endeley as spokesman and the Kamerun Peoples Party (KPP) of N N Mbile. The reunificationists were members of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) of J N Foncha and the *Union des Populations du Cameroon* (UPC) of

<sup>1</sup>Ngoh, V. J. (1987). *Cameroon, 1884-1985: A Hundred Years of History*. Navi-Group Publications.

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Roland Mounie which was banned in 1957 forcing its followers to create One Kamerun (OK) led by Ndeh Ntumazah<sup>2</sup>. The popularity of the various factions could be traced from the various elections organised in the 1950s especially the 1957 and 1959 elections in which all the parties participated either with the platform of independence with Nigeria or reunification with French Cameroon.

However before the 1957 elections, the Southern Cameroonians went to the polls in 1954 to elect representatives for the autonomous region of the Southern Cameroons. The KNC that campaigned for a separate region of Southern Cameroons within Nigeria defeated the KPP which wanted the Southern Cameroons to remain as part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. Endeley became Leader of Government Business because of these votes. This KNC victory convinced the British to grant regional autonomy to the Southern Cameroons. Women did not take part in these elections as the franchise as granted by the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 was limited to adult males.

After these elections, the KNDP was formed in March 1955 by the advocates of reunification with French Cameroon when Endeley abandoned this initial objective of the KNC in 1954. The UPC moved its headquarters from French Cameroon to Kumba, Southern Cameroons in July 1955. These two parties advocated for reunification with French Cameroon an option that did not feature in the 1954 campaigns. In 1957, fresh general elections were organised with the following results. The KNC won seven seats, KNDP six, KPP two and UPC zero seats in the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly (SCHA). The male electorate again gave the KNC a majority in the SCHA. In 1958 Endeley became the Premier of the Southern Cameroons thanks to these votes.

In May-June 1957, the Lancaster House Constitutional Conference and its prolongation in 1958 recommended constitutional changes for the Southern Cameroons. These changes were effected in 1958. Following these changes, the Southern Cameroons became a full or autonomous territory within Nigeria and the Leader of Government Business was to now to become the Prime Minister. Endeley therefore became the first Premier. The Southern Cameroon House of Assembly was enlarged from 13 to 26 seats with a speaker appointed by the Commissioner after consultation with the Premier. The Southern Cameroon House of Chiefs was also created. The Women above 21 were granted the franchise for the first time [3]. This was the most important constitutional reform as far as the female folk was concern. With these changes, elections were scheduled for January 1959 to elect the 26 members of the SCHA. The women were to vote for the first time

### Reasons for the Enfranchisement of the Women

The enfranchisement of women in the Southern Cameroons in 1958 was the outcome of a long battle started by the *Union Démocratique des femmes du Cameroun* (UDEFEC) the female organ of the UPC that took refuge in the territory from 1955. This group led by Marie Irene Ngapeht petitioned the High Commission in Buea, the Secretary for Colonies and the UNO Secretary General on August 16, 1956 on the disenfranchisement of the women in the following words.

Il est inadmissible qu'au Nigeria auquel le Kamerun occidental ent dépit de l'opposition de la grande majorite des populations Kamerunaises, est attaché administrativement et économiquement, les femmes votent et peuvent être élues alors que ce même droit est refusé aux femmes Kamerunaise. Même au Kamerun oriental les femmes bien qu'avec un certaine restriction, votent depuis dix ans alors qu'ici, la volonté des femmes est considérée par l'autorité administrant et les membres de votre assemblée comme quantité négligeable [4].

Summarily, the female nationalists from French Cameroon could not understand why the women in Nigeria could vote and be voted into the various assemblies while their counterparts in the Southern Cameroons could not when the Southern Cameroons was administratively and economically dependent on Nigeria. The UDEFEC militants were anxious to secure the franchise for women because that could guarantee their effective participation in the politics of the Southern Cameroons.

Another issue that led to the enfranchisement of the women emanated from the constitution of the Southern Cameroons which provided that special members would be appointed to represent interests otherwise not represented in the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly. One of such appointees was to be a woman representative. Despite persistent petitions from the women of French Cameroons origin in Victoria and the Southern Cameroons Women Organisation, Endeley instead recommended the appointment of Dorcas Ekowole Idowu to represent the women in 1957 [5]. Idowu was a Southern Cameroonian born in 1903 and was married to a Nigerian in 1919 [6]. Endeley was quite sure that a woman from the Southern Cameroons women's Organisation could

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<sup>2</sup>Nfi, J. L. (2012). *French Cameroonians in the Decolonisation Politics of the Southern Cameroons, 1945-1961* (Doctoral dissertation, PhD Thesis, University of Yaounde 1).

<sup>3</sup>Makongo, M. (2012). *L'expérience démocratique au British Southern Cameroons: cas de l'élection du 24 Janvier 1959*, MA Dissertation in History, University of Douala, 31

<sup>4</sup>Puhe, L.Y. (2007). *Les femmes dans le mouvement nationaliste Camerounais: cas des femmes de l'UDEFEC dans la Sanaga-Maritime*, Maitrise Dissertation, University of Douala, 19.

<sup>5</sup>Chem-Langhëë, B. (1976). *Kamerun Plebiscites 1959-1961: Perceptions and Strategies*. PhD Thesis in History, University of British Columbia, 262.

<sup>6</sup>Dorcas Ekowole Idowu was the leader of the women's section of the KNC in Victoria and a supporter of integration with Nigeria.

not support integration with Nigeria given its links with UPC. The Southern Kamerun Women's Organisation mistook Idowu for a Nigerian and petitioned the appointment and started the struggle for female enfranchisement.

The petitions and the request for the enfranchisement of the woman was rapidly endorsed by the British administering authorities who saw in the measure the continuous integration of the Southern Cameroons within the Nigeria. It should be recalled that by 1959, the reunification movement was increasingly gaining popularity in the territory and the British adopted a number of measure to combat the reunificationists. Granting the franchise to women was to place the Southern Cameroon women at the same political wave length with their Nigerian counterparts and probably win their sympathy for the struggle for independence with Nigeria.

On the other hand the rapid political advancement of the women in French Cameroon as exemplified by the activities of the UPC women in the Southern Cameroons also worked in favour of the enfranchisement of women in the Southern Cameroon. The constitutional changes in French Cameroon that followed the implementation of the October 1956 *loi cadre* had as major innovation the granting of universal adult suffrage to the indigenes. This resulted in women voting for the first time in French Cameroon during the December 23, 1956 legislative elections. The United Nations could not therefore hesitate to encourage the enfranchisement of women in the British Southern Cameroons given that the UN cherished the harmonious and equal advancement of the two territories towards self-rule. The UN Visiting Mission of 1958 was therefore in favoured of such a reform.

Apart from the official appeals in favour of the enfranchisement of the women, their political activities also worked in their favour. It should be recalled that the setup of some of the chiefdoms in the Southern Cameroons permitted women to participate in chiefdom politics and administration. This was the case with the Bafut, Nso, Kom, Mankon, Bali and other Tikar and Chamba chiefdoms of the Bamenda Grasslands of the Southern Cameroons. In these chiefdoms, women had their secret societies known variously as *Takumbeng*, *Anlu Chong* and *Fimbwen* [7]. These societies also participated in the pre-independence politics. The most recorded account of women's protest was the 1958 Kom Women's riot. The Kom women in the *Anlu* uprising protested against the introduction of contour plough as a measure to check soil erosion and ensure soil conservation. The women accused the government of Prime Minister Endeley for violating their traditional farming methods and facilitating Igbo expropriation of local land. Anti-Igbo sentiments came to dominate the *Anlu* rebellion because the contour plough reform endorsed by the Endeley government was implemented by Igbo agric-engineers at a time when the Igbo were guilty of many atrocities in the Southern Cameroons [8]. Endeley's opponents especially the KNDP baron in Kom, A N Jua took advantage of the crisis to circulate rumours that the KNC government of E M L Endeley had sold the Kom land to the Igbo which according to Kom beliefs could led to a drastic fall in soil fertility and harvest. From July 4, 1958 the revolt started and more than 2000 Kom women marched to Bamenda a distance of 80km [9]. They were joined by other women from Wum, Bafut and Babanki. Malcome Milne the Deputy Commissioner for the Southern Cameroons and Ken Shaddock the Divisional Officer for Bamenda received the women and accepted to suspend the law on contour plough. This was an indication that women were a force to reckon with and that women were to play a vital role in the battle for leadership between the KNC and the KNDP. The British could not continue to ignore the demands of the women

### The 1959 Elections

The January 1959 general elections in the Southern Cameroons therefore took place few months after the women of the Southern Cameroon had scored two major victories. They had just forced the British authorities to suspend an important land use law and mobilised women in almost all of the Bamenda Grassland against the Endeley government. Secondly they were granted the right to vote by the September-October 1958 London Constitutional Conference pending the January elections.

All political parties-the KNC, KNDP, KPP and OK-campaigned vigorously in 1959. The KNDP had the support of the OK as and campaigned for reunification with French Cameroon but most often they offered the electorate secession from Nigeria because they knew that many were against Nigerian domination. The KNC supported by the KPP wanted independence with Nigeria. Endeley indicated that it was better to continue with Nigeria and the British way of life than to embrace the unknown or the French culture with French Cameroon.

Endeley's government adopted a series of measures to prevent the KNDP from winning the elections. The irregularities introduced in order to procure a pro-integration vote included the introduction of the ministerial system of government. This had a lot to do with the votes because the chiefs whose subjects were ministers rejected Foncha as they desired to have their subjects as ministers. During the campaigns, Endeley also used government vehicles, and the government information service while Foncha and his group traveled on foot or on bicycles since they had no opportunity to use government cars. The police were also used extensively

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<sup>7</sup>These were regulatory societies that worked on the welfare of the women in the various chiefdoms. For more, see Nkwi, P. N., & Warnier, J. P. (1982). *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*. Department of Sociology, University of Yaoundé.

<sup>8</sup>The Igbo were accused of atrocities like cannibalism, counterfeiting, profiteering, land expropriation, rape, adultery, adulteration of palm wine, drugs and kerosene and disrespect for local customs

<sup>9</sup>Kah, H. K. (2011). Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: The Power of Symbols, Organization, and Leadership, 1957-1961. *African Studies Quarterly*, 12(3), 61.

to harass any person opposed to integration with Nigeria [10]. The most important was the manipulation of the electoral districts. These districts were arranged in such a way as to favour the KNC-KPP alliance. In rearranging the electoral district to suit the enlarged parliament of 26, Endeley gave areas with known integrationist tendencies a disproportionate share of seats to the detriment of areas known to be supporting the KNDP [11]. Lastly the KNC government also discriminated in the voters qualification. While Nigerians with two years residence in the Southern Cameroons registered and voted with ease, French Cameroon immigrants had to be in the region for ten years and produce tax slips for that effect before being allowed to vote. Even when they satisfied these requirements, it was alleged, registration forms were always exhausted when they were around and available when Nigerians came [12]. Despite these frustrations and alleged frustrations, Foncha still defeated Endeley perhaps because of the female factor.

During the campaigns, the wishes and aspirations of the women were not ignored at least by the opposition KNDP-OK coalition. The KNDP-OK campaign team exploited the unpopular and unfamiliar contour plough rules which the KNC government had enforced in the Bamenda Grassland to discredit the KNC government. The entire peasant community in the Grassland was made to understand that the much publicised contour plough system of farming was not the best. In fact many women in the region abandoned the KNC.

While the opposition was busy wooing the female electorate in the Bamenda Grassland by exploiting the unpopular contour plough law, Endeley and the KNC were unable to do same in the forest south. Instead Endeley is known to have alienated the Bayang female electorate in the Mamfe Division when he arrogantly declared them unable and unclean to produce a man of his caliber [13]. This arrogance greatly contrasted the humility and simplicity with which Foncha, Jua and other KNDP barons approached the female voters. These campaign strategies and declaration certainly influenced the results.

The KNDP-OK coalition defeated the KNC-KPP coalition by 75.326 to 51.384 votes. The KNDP won 14 seats, the KNC 8 seats and the KPP 4 seats in the 26 seats Southern Cameroon House of Assembly. Following the results, the E M L Endeley who organised the elections accepted defeat and this resulted in a peaceful, harmonious and dignified handing over of power to J N Foncha [14]. This democratic regime change was welcomed all over Africa and many women were proud to have contributed to the change.

Many women participated in the elections even if their involvement was somehow timid. This could be understood because this was the first time they were voting and also because the coastal women had very little stakes in the exercise. But did the female votes contribute to the regime change?, The answer is yes as can be elucidated by the following analyses. First, of the four electoral districts in the Wum Division where the *Anlu* or anti-Endeley riots occurred on the eve of the elections, the East Electoral District (Kom) where the *Anlu* originated, had 4469 voters, 3262 voted for the KNDP candidate and only 453 voted for the KNC [15]. This means that 73 percent of the voters opted for the KNDP candidate against less than 27 percent for the KNC. The KNC did not register any exceptionally brilliant score against the KNDP in any of the electoral districts within the Wum Division. This can only be explained by the female votes given that the close to 2000 women who marched against Endeley from Njinikom to Bamenda was amongst the voters in the East Electoral District (Kom) and that the other women elsewhere in Wum sympathized with them.

The Aghem and Bu women in Wum Division certainly worked for the KNDP victory because according to Kah, political power was also at the center of the *Kelu Women Revolution* in Bubetween 1957 and 1959. The women gave their support to the KNDP because Bu was a bastion of the ruling KNC with men like Rev Thomas Ngon Amaazee, Baniel Atie Kungem and Andrew Ado whom they did not like [16]. This contributed to the KNDP victory.

The impact of the *Anlu* on the female votes was not limited to Wum Division. During the *Anlu*, some Kom women visited their sisters in the fraternal chieftom of Nso about 100km from Liakom, the headquarter of the Kom chieftom. These women were given fraternal treatment by the woman and Fon of Nso. In 1959 and regardless of the fact that their monarch was a militant of Endeley's

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<sup>10</sup>Chem-Langhee, B. (1976). *The Kamerun plebiscites 1959-1961: Perceptions and strategies* (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia). 263.

<sup>11</sup>This poor allocation of seats accounted for the disparity between the popular votes and the seats obtained by the KNDP/OK and the KNC/KPP. While the seats were 12 for the ruling alliance and 14 for the opposition, the popular votes were 75.326 for Foncha (55 percent) and 51.425 for Endeley (37 percent). The rest 8 percent (10.423 votes) went to Independent Candidates.

<sup>12</sup>NAB, Petition from the President of the KNDP, Kumba, 1958.

<sup>13</sup>Ngoh, *Cameroon, 1884-1985*, p.215

<sup>14</sup>Ndi, A. (2016). *The Golden Age of Southern Cameroons*, Bamenda, Spear Media Press, 126.

<sup>15</sup>Ngoh, *Cameroon, 1884-1985*, p.211

<sup>16</sup>Kah, H K. (2012). Feminist Activism, Economic Carte Blanche, Political Control, Symbol and Symbolism: A Historical Interpretation of the *Kelu Women Revolution* in Bu-Cameroon 1957-1959. *Afrika Zamani*, 17, 81-100.

KNC, the majority of the Nso people voted for the KNDP [17]. It is therefore clear that the *Anlu* rebellion and the plight of the Kom and Grassland women influenced the votes in Nso.

Better still the general tendency was that the electorate in the Grassland voted against Endeley and this could also be linked to the *Anlu*. The 1958 women's riot did not only help to increase the political awareness of the Grassland women, it also widened the gap between the coastal politician and the Grassland electorates who imagined that the leader from the coast was not interested in their welfare. They blamed Endeley for neglecting the Grassland and for disrespecting their chiefs. Ethnicity and zonal and cultural differences between the two zones therefore worked in favour of Foncha whose Grassland base had about 52 percent of the 1959 voters.

In Mamfe where Endeley is alleged to have told the women that "Mamfe women would not produce a man of his status [18]" he was also defeated significantly. In the Mamfe West Electoral District in particular only 1202 voters voted for the KNC out of 8630 voters meaning that about 86 percent of the electorate voted against Endeley. In the Mamfe South Electoral District only 1449 voters out of 8074 voted for the KNC meaning that about 82 percent of the electorates were against the KNC and its leader [19]. These were the worse scores registered by the KNC in the forest zone believed to be the fief of the KNC. Female's voters certainly sanctioned the KNC as many women voted against Endeley because of his arrogance and insults. With all these considerations it is but certain that Endeley lost elections in 1959 because he failed to woo the newly enfranchised female voters of the Southern Cameroons. However some other factor certainly contributed to his demise. The Grassland chiefs were not satisfied with his government for he failed to develop their region and secure for them a house of chiefs. The Catholics were also disgruntled by the fact that Endeley's government constituted in 1954 excluded Foncha and other Catholic politicians. The KNDP was therefore seen by these diehard Catholics as the machinery to overthrow Endeley's protestant regime. Lastly the ethnic factor was also at work. The Grasslanders tended to see the KNDP as their party whiles the coastal people saw Endeley as their natural leaders. This ethnic factor could only work against Endeley given that the Grassland had about 52 percent of the population.

## CONCLUSION

The British Southern Cameroon administered to the world a splendid lesson of democracy in January 1959 when the elections organised by the Premier Endeley (KNC) were marginally won by the opposition Foncha (KNDP). This was followed by a magnificent peaceful, harmonious and dignified handover of power in Buea. Foncha with 14 deputies in the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly of 26 seats became the Premier. Endeley who had served as Leader of Government Business since 1954 and who was the best-known Southern Cameroonian political leader because of his physical build, intelligence, self-abnegation and simplicity was forced to bow at the time many considered to be too early for him to exit power. In this political history making event the women of the Southern Cameroons played a key role. Enfranchised in 1958, the women were fast to vomit Endeley who despite the qualities mentioned above could also vacillate as he did over the issue of reunification which he abandoned in 1954 or become vindictive and tactlessly arrogant as when he insulted the Mamfe women in 1959. In fact Endeley's demise could be traced back to the Kom women's riots for this rebellion marked the emancipation of the Grassland Women in particular and Southern Cameroon women in general. It also exposed the uncompromising, vindictive and arrogant character of the Premier Endeley. It was for these reasons that the women worked for and obtained the KNDP victory and change of regime in 1959.

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<sup>17</sup>Ngalim, A. B. (2008). Igbo in the Nso Fandom: Their Presence and Activities 1922-2005. MA Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde 1, 112.

<sup>18</sup>Ngoh, p.215

<sup>19</sup>Makongo, "L'experience democratique au British Southern Cameroons" p.76