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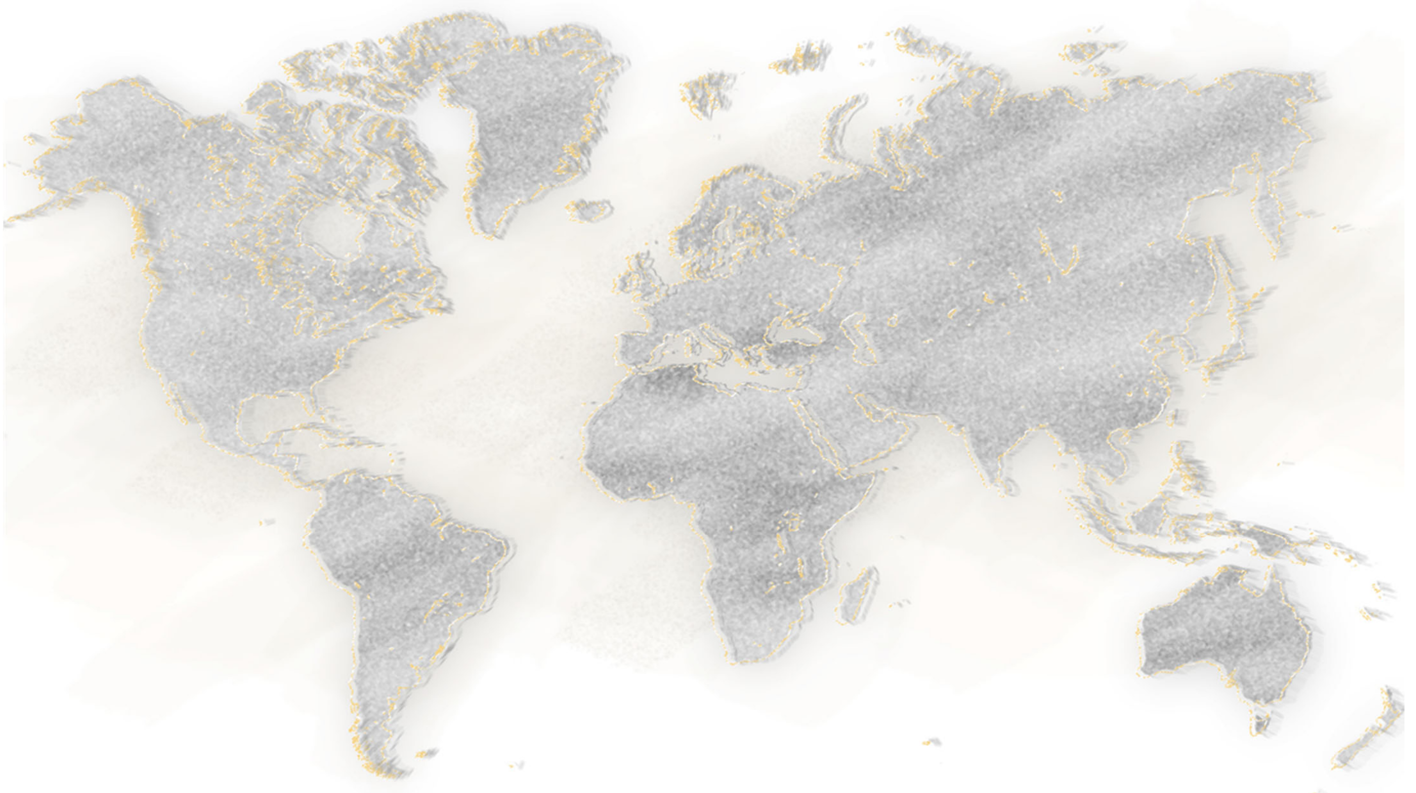

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Dialogue as the new mantra in responding to political crisis in Africa? The cases of Mali and Cameroon

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Abstract

Over the past decade several governments in Africa have experimented with diverse forms of "political dialogue" to address a variety of domestic political crises, ranging from political or constitutional turmoil to armed conflict. On the face of it most dialogues are not very successful or consequential as regards their results and impact. And yet, in political, symbolical and communicative terms they occupy a central, if seemingly short-lived place in national politics. They also absorb the attention of foreign diplomats who pin their hopes on dialogue as offering a solution to crisis. Rather than assessing these events in terms of their problem-solving effectiveness, we examine the motivations that underpin the organisation and dynamics of such events. We will explore comparatively two recent cases (Mali, Cameroon) by looking at dialogue from four different perspectives. Exploring dialogue through the prism of co-optation strategies, institutional legacies, political theatre and peacebuilding, we will examine actors, their constellation, interests and expectations, the content/process of negotiations and their outcome/impact. This not only allows us to have a realistic assessment of the chances of success of such forums, but to make political sense of a (materially) costly event.

Introduction

Over the past decade, a number of Sub-Saharan African countries have experimented with an emerging political practice and format. These are instances of national political mass gatherings variously labelled as "political dialogue", national "forum", "concertation" or "conference". Such formats are usually initiated by besieged incumbent governments to address a long simmering but escalating political crisis or emergency that manifests itself, for example, in sustained mass demonstrations, strikes, boycotts or high-level tensions in increasingly polarised political contexts. Among the immediate causes are disputed elections, contested constitutional amendments, violent uprisings or other forms of contention that may not only threaten political stability, but also signal the weakening authority of incumbent rulers. Governmental initiators portray dialogue in rather grandiose and dramatic language as a broad-based and inclusive national conversation on pressing issues that should be resolved through consultation and exchange, based on principles of inclusiveness and participation of the country's social and political entities such as political parties and civil society representatives.

Between 2010 and 2020, 14 African countries organised some form of national political dialogue (see Table 1), excluding formats more narrowly focused on a specific issue (peace, labour, etc.). For instance, in Sudan in 2014, against the backdrop of an internal regime crisis that added to a number of long-standing challenges, President al-Bashir invited all of the country's political parties to attend a national political dialogue "for deliberating the fundamental questions facing the country in

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preparation for a comprehensive 'national leap'" (Saeid 2017: 19). Similarly, in Benin, a post-electoral crisis in 2019 led the country's contested president to convene a national dialogue to address political tensions. While carefully avoiding any description of the situation as a crisis, he stressed "the urgent need to reform our political and partisan practices in order to improve the overall governance of the country" (Vidjingninou 2019[2]). Between March and May 2017 Gabon's President Ali Bongo held a financially expensive national dialogue with members of the opposition that resulted in a government reshuffle, the integration of various opposition politicians into the government and the postponement of legislative elections (Yates 2018: 252). In 2019, both Cameroon and Mali conducted lavish dialogues prominently covered by the national media.

Table 1: National Dialogue Forums in Africa since 2010

Country	Official Name	Objectives	Framing by Head of State[3]
Benin (2019)	Dialogue Politique / Dialogue national	Resolution of political crisis following the parliamentary elections in February 2019	President Patrice Talon: "The political dialogue to which I invite you finds its justification in the will of our people to see their political actors rise to the challenges of state-building and national consolidation." (Présidence de la République du Bénin)
Burkina Faso (2019)	Dialogue politique	Resolution of the political crisis between government and opposition in the run-up to the elections	President Roch Marc Christian Kabore: "Therefore, I invite the participants to carefully and realistically examine the issues relating to the presidential and legislative elections of 2020, and the issue of the constitutional referendum, as well as the major concerns of the national situation." (Préseidence du Faso 2019)
Cameroon (2019)	Grand dialogue national	Resolution of the anglophone crisis	President Paul Biya: "The entire national community has high expectations for the dialogue I have just announced and hopes that this will be an opportunity for our brothers and sisters in the North-West and South-West to close this particularly painful chapter, to forget their suffering and to return to normal life." (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon 2019)
DR Congo (2016)	Dialogue national	Resolution of the electoral crisis	President Joseph Kabila: "The ongoing establishment of the Preparatory Committee, and the forthcoming establishment of the international facilitation, will allow the effective start of this dialogue in the near future, with the aim of finding consensual solutions to the major issues undermining the electoral process, thus paving the way for credible and peaceful elections."(7sur7 2015)
Equatorial-Guinea (2018)	VI Mesa de dialogo nacional	Strengthening of the political unity and peace	President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo: "The VI National Dialogue Table has not been convened because there is an institutional crisis in the state, nor because there is a political or social crisis or instability of ungovernability. We have convened this dialogue because of the will that animates us to lead our nation to understanding, to unity of criteria, to strengthen the union between Guineans, unity,

[2] Exception: Lesotho. This and all other quotes not originally in English have been translated by the authors, unless otherwise indicated. In the following table we opted for the original language.

			peace, as the nation reaches 50 years of independence, which is the golden anniversary." (PDGE 2018)
Gabon (2017)	Dialogue national d'Angondjé	Resolution of the post-electoral crisis following the disputed presidential elections in august 2016	President Ali Bongo Ondimba: "This political dialogue, which will begin in the aftermath of the CAN 2017, must address all issues relating to the institutional life of our country, its development and the strengthening of its place in the concert of nations." (Le nouveau Gabon 2017)
Lesotho (2018)	National Dialogue	Implementation of constitutional, security sector, governance, media and judicial reforms recommended by SADC	Lesotho's Deputy Prime Minister Monyane Moleleki, "highlighted that the National Leader's Forum serves as a confidence building measure among stakeholders and provides new impetus for the implementation of SADC decisions. He further observed that the convening of the meeting was a reflection of the commitment and resolve of Basotho towards the implementation of the envisaged reforms." (SADC 2018)
Mali (2019)	Dialogue national inclusif	Resolution of the multidimensional crisis context	President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita: "It will be a matter for you to examine the country in order to see what the pain is, where it comes from and how to treat it. You are a force for proposals. And the people will expect from you that your national congress will not be just another congress, but the congress that was needed to strengthen our democratic process, adapt our institutions, correct our governance, stabilise our country, strengthen our common will to live together. And this popular expectation comes at a time when the security crisis that has hit us has revealed all the weaknesses and shortcomings of our administration." (Présidence du Mali 2019)
Mauritania (2011)	Dialogue national	Economic and social Development	President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz:"Our objective is to achieve the purpose of democracy in terms of economic and social development. We are working to make diversity and pluralism signs of wealth, with the regular reconsideration and transparency that will allow everyone to show seriousness and objectivity, far from selfish tendencies, in the general interest that remains the construction of this country." (Agence mauritanienne d'information 2011)
Mauritania (2016)	Dialogue national	Constitutional reform (abolition of the senate, implementation of elected regional councils, creation of a vice-president's post)	Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz: "Serious political dialogue open to all national political actors remains a constant choice to which we have renewed our commitment at every opportunity. On this happy National Day, I reiterate our commitment to the option of dialogue as the preferred way to overcome all obstacles and a means of mutual assistance in national construction." (Agence mauritanienne d'information 2015)
Nigeria (2014)	National Conference	Resolution of conflicts (Boko Haram, intercommunal conflicts,	President Goodluck Jonathan: "The National Conference is therefore being convened to engage in intense introspection about the political and socio-economic challenges confronting our nation and to chart the best and most acceptable way for the resolution of such challenges

		oil conflicts in the Niger Delta)	in the collective interest of all the constituent parts of our fatherland." (African Integrity Magazine 2014)
Sudan (2015/2016)	Sudan's National Dialogue Conference	Resolution of conflicts between government and opposition forces and of internal crises	President Omar el-Bashir: "Sudan is looking up to a new phase following the transitional period and the separation of South Sudan, so there has to be preparedness for a great leap that essentially leads to national loyalty rather than partisan loyalty." (Nation.Africa 2014)
Zambia (2019)	National Dialogue	Implementation of the resolutions on constitutional and institutional reforms -> Facilitation of the amendment of the constitution, electoral law reform and governance of political parties	President Edgar Chagwa Lungu: "As we validate the draft constitution over the next 10 days, I urge you to fully commit yourselves to this important national assignment which has been bestowed on us by the people of Zambia. I also wish to urge you to acquaint yourselves with the contents of the national dialogue. To be precise, the constitution, electoral process, public order and political parties act no.6 of 2019, the constitution of Zambia (amendment) bill, 2019, the electoral process (amendment) bill, 2019, […] so that our contributions to this process are concise." (State House of the Republic of Zambia 2019)

As a format or a practice, political dialogue is distinct from peace negotiations to end civil wars. We also distinguish dialogue from bargaining during regime transitions, as was the case during the early 1990s with the sovereign national conferences that were organised in a context when emerging pro-democracy movements triggered revolutionary situations in most Francophone African countries. The boundaries between these different political formats and contexts are not clear-cut, however. A crisis that gives rise to political dialogue can also lead to transitions; indeed, this may often be the hope of opposition voices. Similarly, in countries where dialogue is organised, it is often the case that some form of political violence is already pervasive. Likewise, political parties or civil society groups may contest a regime or policies such as economic austerity measures, the inclusion/exclusion of certain minorities or institutional reform advocated by the executive.

Despite these variations, it is nonetheless possible to identify a number of characteristics that broadly apply to most contexts in which political dialogue is organised:

- As a response to a national political crisis of some duration, dialogue is mostly initiated by hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes, although democracies may utilise it as well.
- Governments are under domestic and to a lesser extent international pressure, but retain a fair degree of agency and leverage. Dialogue may be designed to expand or regain political space.
- The crisis leading to dialogue is simmering and rather general in nature. However, abrupt events normally add to the pressure on governments – triggering the decision to hold political dialogues.

Convening a dialogue is therefore an acknowledgement by a government of the need to respond to a crisis that is serious enough to warrant more than just routine treatment. At the same time, it may also have preventive motivations in the sense of nipping a crisis in the bud before it takes on a larger and potentially regime-threatening dimension.

Other features that are common to national dialogue processes include:

- They are very formalised and ceremonial events. As high-visibility acts, they are held at a prominent venue and feature solemn openings and closure ceremonies, national flags and anthems. These choreographic elements are meant to underline the seriousness and potential reach of an event that, despite its inclusiveness, is attended by invitation only.
- National dialogues have clearly defined starting points and end dates, potentially to delimit their aim and scope, thereby cutting short any expectations for a full national conference (see below).
- By assembling hundreds of (elite) participants national dialogues have the pretence of inclusivity. Being invited is a form of recognition with regard to the political value and relevancy of individuals and organisations.

Yet it is not audacious to predict that future historians will not describe these dialogues as major landmarks or turning points of national political history. The majority of these events have limited consequences. The agenda and the criteria for the selection of participants are contested, the ownership of the event is unclear, significant political players often pull out or boycott the event from the beginning. The objectives and finality of the proceedings remain obscure. Outcomes are often framed as recommendations, but their political impact and afterlives remain vague. Broad appeals to national unity, peace or the necessity to build new national foundations are common. It is perhaps for all these reasons that political dialogue has received virtually no attention by academic observers. It is tempting to deride political dialogue formats as inconsequential talk shops.

Still, these events attract considerable national attention among politicians, civil society groups and media, as well as from foreign diplomats and organisations such as the UN and sub-regional bodies that often express concerns over the crisis that the dialogue sets out to address. The very fact that dialogue takes place suggests that it matters. There may be political stakes surrounding a crisis, including potential “costly signals” and tests of commitment affecting the chances of transitions or settlements that may end a crisis or violent conflict (Simmons and Danner 2010: 232). In such a situation, costly concessions can increase the prospects of success (Hartzell and Hoddie 2007: 92ff). In our understanding, costly signals are part of communicative action (see below). However, faith in the opponent increases only incrementally when commitments are fulfilled step by step (Hartzell and Hoddie 2007: 95). Announcing a dialogue forum is a first “costly signal” by a regime. Conversely, hardline opponents who give up a boycott – risking alienating followers – also send a costly signal. Embattled governments may not take the decision lightly to embark on a dialogue with political and civil society, but they may see opportunities in taking such a step. The same is true for the hundreds of participants from political parties and civil society organisations. Dialogue forces regime opponents to take a stand, firstly with respect to the event itself, by either participating or boycotting the process, but equally with regard to the issues that are on the agenda.

The question, therefore, is how we should think about the paradox of political dialogue formats: widely used, yet producing almost always underwhelming outcomes. How can we make sense of the seeming banality of these symbolically charged gatherings with their elaborate ceremonial trappings and high-flying recommendations, whose implementation and political fate is all but certain?

In other words, what are the functions that organisers, participants and stakeholders associate with these mass gatherings? This is a question that local political actors may ask themselves as well, especially those from the opposition. Why do many players participate anyway, possibly lending significance and legitimacy to political dialogue? Is dialogue just a cynical political game, whereby resilient rulers adapt to contestation, seeking to weaken and divide the opposition, whereas opponents hope for material handouts, or co-optation into the state or the government? Or are

there more substantive stakes involved? More specifically, does political dialogue simply symbolise inclusiveness while excluding the most radical opponents from decision-making? Alternatively, does it help identify those opinion leaders who should or can be co-opted by the regime, therefore representing yet another instrument in an autocrat's toolkit? Do dialogues contain risks for incumbent leaders – namely when they develop dynamics of their own, ultimately allowing a take-over by revolutionary forces working towards regime change? These might not be fully mutually exclusive perspectives.

We argue that it is worthwhile exploring the possible political significance of these events. This may pertain not so much to their outcome and impact – although surprises are not excluded – but to the rationales of the main actors, which are shaped by the experiences and historicity of a country's political trajectory, and therefore by distinctive constraints and expectations. The examples of Cameroon and Mali, where political dialogue was organised in 2019, will serve as case studies to explore the nature and meaning of political dialogue. Although regime quality is not a decisive factor, both hybrid and autocratic regimes are far more likely to deploy dialogue than democratic ones. In selecting these examples, we examine dialogue in contrasting cases as regards their regime quality. While Cameroon is a consolidated autocratic system despite formal democratic trappings, Mali had a liberal regime from 1991 until the outbreak of armed conflict in 2013, when violence and political uncertainty pushed the country towards a more hybrid political system.

Both dialogues were elite gatherings that lasted several days. Both are embedded in these countries' political trajectories, which could be traced over a period of several decades. A key assumption is that such gatherings, despite their similarity, cannot be understood outside of their political and historical context. We propose a focused description and analysis of each case to compare the dialogues' content, sequence, output, participants and potentially the graphic and symbolic aspects of these events. Important questions to elucidate the nature of dialogue include who was *not* represented and what issues were *not* discussed at the event, though they mattered clearly in the broader context of the crisis. However, these events are inscribed in long-term trajectories and their political historicity is therefore important. A snapshot analysis alone runs the risk of misconstruing the political nature of seemingly banal events

Locating political dialogue

To the best of our knowledge, political dialogue as we define it has received little scholarly attention. However, as a political practice it resonates and intersects with political contexts and debates that help to situate dialogue in conceptual terms.

1. Co-optation

Rulers of autocratic or hybrid political systems can resort to a wide range of tools to extend their political survival. If repression and intimidation are the most obvious choices, they are hardly the only ones. This is because a persistently high level of repression creates significant political costs that render excessive levels of violence risky and possibly ineffective (Svolik 2012; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). Hence, an important strategy to prevent the rise of challengers is the use of political and economic mechanisms to forge alliances, strike elite bargains and encourage the loyalty of followers or erstwhile opponents (Svolik 2012; Arriola 2009; Arriola 2013; Lindemann 2011; Geddes 2018). Through this distributive strategy rulers allocate and regulate access to economic opportunities or wholesale transfers (rents) to followers. Its basic premise is that the political loyalty (or compliance)

of followers is bolstered when given a stake in the ruler's personal survival (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010: 126; Raleigh and Wigmore-Shepherd 2020; Arriola 2009; Gandhi 2008). Policy concessions may serve similar purposes. The distribution of spoils seeks to disorganise opponents by drawing some of them to the centre of political and economic power via formal (parties, parliaments, government) or informal institutions (patronage networks). Co-optation-based inclusionary strategies require astute handling and depend on the ability of the ruler to build and maintain a careful balance among various sets of actors, some of whom may organise resistance or even violence to drive up the prize for their political allegiance, though co-optation capacities in poor and war-ravaged low-income countries may be limited (De Waal 2015; Vries and Mehler 2019).

2. Managing Contestation: Institutional Legacies and Diffusion Effects

The calculus of political survival leads savvy rulers to embrace long-term strategic behaviour, but this does not shield them from intermittent challenges. The literature on the democratisation period of the early 1990s provides important insights into the crisis management of incumbent elites at critical junctures, and how political legacies of authoritarian rule shape outcomes of political contestation in periods of uncertainty when opposition forces seek to negotiate new political rules and dispensations (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Riedl 2014).

Both successful and failed transitions to democracy provide cues to understanding the puzzle of dialogue forums. The focus of transition literature has been squarely on the motivations, calculations and choices of a narrow set of self-interested actors under conditions of uncertainty. However, empirical analysis has found regularities and patterns that cannot be explained simply by tactical choices (Bratton and Van der Walle 1997: 19–27). Outcomes are connected to processes and institutions into which individual agency is necessarily embedded. In the historical dimension this refers to political institutions and precedents that provide individuals with constraints and opportunities to navigate situations of uncertainty (Seely 2009). For example, the variable outcomes of the political liberalisation in the 1990s were partly determined by the specific institutional properties of the previous regime type (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). The proposition that structure and process had a combined effect on liberalisation is for example confirmed by the spread of Sovereign National Conferences (SNCs). Remarkably enough, they were organised in only eleven Francophone countries, but led to divergent outcomes (Eboussi-Boulaga 1993; Robinson 1994). Activists across the region were clearly inspired by the early precedent of an SNC in Benin, which culminated in liberalisation and ultimately a change of regime, but the example also enabled autocratic rulers elsewhere to draw valuable lessons on how to manage and manipulate SNCs to see off the opposition. Since then, the diffusion of ideas, discourses, and practices from one country to another has become a fertile field of research to analyse the behaviour and tactics of both pro-democracy forces and autocratic elites (von Soest and Grauvogel 2017; Hall and Ambrosio 2017; Heydemann and Leenders 2011).

Indeed, the resemblance of more recent dialogue forums with the SNCs of the 1990s may not be fortuitous. Governmental elites and opponents sometimes allude to them as political precedents: the former as a potentially risky precedent, the later as a potentially promising venue. This indicates that past experience informs current thinking and strategies. Learning and adaptation is not only evident within countries, but also across countries as rulers and their opponents take their cues from events elsewhere, especially in their own region as ideas and concepts travel from one country to the next. Needless to say: incumbents and opponents have widely different expectations with respect to dialogue.

3. Dialogue as Political Theatre

Another approach to exploring dialogue is to shine a light on its performative effects. This is an especially promising perspective to explain the behaviour of autocratic rulers whose record of governing provides little reason to assume their belief in the normative assumptions that underpin the concept of dialogue, such as participation, inclusiveness and exchange. If few dialogues seem to have clearly identifiable outcomes, this begs the question about the purpose of dialogue or even simply the act of organising it. To paraphrase Ferguson's observation on development, "it may be that what is most important about [dialogue] is not so much what it fails to do but what it does do; it may be that its real importance in the end lies in the 'side effects'" (Ferguson 2006: 272).

Dialogue may be considered as a theatralisation of power, staged and enacted for a political purpose, namely to enhance the authority and legitimacy of rulers, to ascertain their political supremacy and their "right" to govern, which implies "active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (Gerschewski 2013: 18; see also Schatzberg 2001). Like the SNCs of the early 1990s, dialogue may be variously considered as a festival of "transgressions" or something akin to group "therapy" or a palaver (Eboussi-Boulaga 1993: 147–56).

But, as anthropologists remind us, dialogue as "theatrocracy" is not a purely instrumental manoeuvre. This is so simply because it is inherent in every form of organised power (Balandier 1980; Korom 2013: 3). Dialogue in this sense is not merely a coat that the ruler decides to wear, and which would add a theatrical addition to his or her actually existing power. The theatralisation itself is part of the power at play. Dialogue as performance is not an act that the ruler organises for the benefit of an audience. Rather the audience is an integral part of the political theatre, as are those who decide to participate in it, such as opponents, party representatives, civil society leaders, etc. This perspective suggests that dialogue is more than verbal communication – that is, what is pronounced at the occasion, such as calls for peace, unity and dialogue. A narrow focus on spoken discourse would miss the decorum, the cultural codes and messages through which words acquire meaning and significance (Korom 2013: 3). Put differently, the deliberations may not be as important as the event itself and its rhetoric, symbolism, rituals and slogans. Language and symbols, however spurious and predictable, produce effects that may reassert political power (Schatzberg 2001; Wedeen 2002: 723). Formal dialogue may be well suited to restricting and disciplining opposition voices, in particular when behaviour, language and vocabulary are somewhat restricted by formalistic and ritualistic procedures and decorum.

4. Peacebuilding

In the event that a crisis has passed a certain threshold, involving violent acts of contestation, political dialogue could be conceived as a tool to manage not only political disputes, but also armed conflict. The literature on institutional mechanisms for preventing or managing armed conflict (here subsumed under the term peacebuilding) offers additional perspectives on the concept of dialogue. Dialogue appears as a standard proposal of a school of thought that tends to depict violent escalation of conflict less as a manifestation of antagonistic and incompatible interests than as a consequence of an absence of communication. Philosophically, this view on dialogue is underpinned by Habermas's theory of communicative action, whereby discourse is immunised against repression and inequality (Habermas 1984). In essence, dialogue would be a competition for the better argument and possibly compromise.

While the concept of dialogue remains hazy, it has gained widespread currency in international politics and diplomacy as a method and even shortcut to solving a conflict by means of negotiation,

“hailed as a progressive force in fostering mutual understanding and resolving conflicts” (Rieker and Thune 2015: 1). Organisations in the field of conflict mediation and peacebuilding have been particularly active in advocating political dialogue (Berghof Foundation 2017; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2017; Paffenholz et al. 2017). In conflicts in which religion has featured prominently, inter-religious dialogue has been propagated as an effective conflict management tool. Mediation initiatives, often carried out by specialised NGOs and financed by governments in Europe, have proliferated over the past decade, especially in Africa (Bercovitch and Gartner 2009; Crocker 2007).

Advocates of dialogue and peacebuilding have long argued that inclusive, participatory and accountable governance fosters the legitimacy of the political system as an essential condition for reducing the risk of violent conflict, i.e. conflict prevention (Cortright 2017; United Nations and World Bank 2018).[4] Likewise, inclusion is seen as a key aspect of successful management of violent conflict (Carl 2019). It becomes clear, then, that political dialogue draws heavily on normative notions of inclusiveness, participation and exchange, although this is the subject of long-standing critiques, both by the liberal peacebuilding paradigm and the conflict transformation school (Paffenholz 2015). However, searching for effective dialogue may be an exceedingly difficult challenge as regards conflicts playing out in weakly institutionalised states with previous episodes of conflict and a long history of entrenched authoritarian or pseudo-democratic rule. Political elites in these countries have a poor track record of fostering inclusiveness, reconciliation and participation. Under these conditions, it may be questionable whether meditation and peacebuilding can be usefully applied to preempt armed conflict.

Whether co-optation, institutional legacies, theatralisation or peacebuilding offer relevant criteria to assess and categorise specific dialogue forums is a matter of careful empirical observation as regards content, sequence, output, participants and symbolic aspects of such an event.

For the purposes of this paper, we propose the following working hypotheses to explore political dialogue:

1. Inclusiveness in participation is not a matter of the number of participants, but of the inclusion of the main avowed regime opponents. Invitation policies, boycotts, joining or leaving the forum are important indicators of inclusiveness.
2. A fixed, top-down agenda is an indicator of a stage-managed process that most probably only serves the regime, while a participatory process potentially opens avenues towards regime softening or even political reform.
3. Historicity matters: the behaviour of all actors towards dialogue forums (re. agenda-setting, invitation policy, participation/boycott, co-optation, theatralisation) is shaped and informed by the nature of the political system, regime politics and notably earlier experiences with such forums and with other (government–opposition) interactions in the political arena.
4. Dialogue processes as forms of “communicative action” that serve a better understanding (and therefore peace) are at work when a) the arguments exchanged build upon each other, b) the outcome of the dialogue processes is not fixed in advance.

In the following we will examine the political dialogues that took place in Cameroon and Mali in 2019. A snapshot of two previous dialogues in each of these countries, i.e. the National Conference in Mali and the Tripartite Conference in Cameroon (1991) will be presented in a subsequent section.

[4] For a critical analysis of mediation and power-sharing see Tull and Mehler (2005) and Chebli (2020).

A focused description of dialogue processes in Cameroon and Mali

In the next two sections we will offer a short, necessarily incomplete description of the two dialogue events through the lens of our previously outlined categories and criteria. We will look at how these events were prepared (invitation policy and agenda-setting), the main characteristics of each forum itself (participation/boycott, freedom of speech) and finally its conclusions as well as preliminary outcomes in terms of implementation.

The Grand Dialogue National in Cameroon

Cameroonian President Paul Biya announced "a major national dialogue" in the state media on 10 September 2019 to resolve the conflict between pro-independence groups from Cameroon's two Anglophone regions (Southwest and Northwest) and the government. By the time of Biya's announcement, the conflict had killed 3,000 people (Human Rights Watch 2020) and displaced another 680,000 (UNHCR Cameroon 2020). Some 60,000 refugees had fled to neighbouring Nigeria (UNHCR Nigeria 2020). An estimated 2 million people in the Anglophone regions depended on humanitarian aid (UN 2020) and approximately 850,000 children went without schooling (UN 2019).

"Appealing to the patriotism and sense of responsibility of all our compatriots," Biya called upon Cameroonians to "seize this historic opportunity to help to steer our country on the path of peace, harmony, security and progress." Dialogue was presented as an opportunity for citizens in the Anglophone Regions to "close this particularly painful chapter, to forget their suffering and to return to normal life" (Biya 2019).[5]

By promising to invite a wide range of social and political players the government represented the dialogue as an inclusive undertaking, even if *de facto* the conditions and circumstances did not permit as much (see below). The government invited participants according to obscure criteria, mostly representatives of political parties (AFP, CPP, MN, MRC, PAL, PCRN, PU, PURS, RDPC, SDF, UDC, UNDP, UPC),[6] civil society, religious authorities (Conférence Episcopale, Conseil de l'Église Protestante, Conseil des Imams et Dignitaires Musulmans), traditional authorities, the Cameroonian diaspora and 16 exiled leaders of Anglophone separatist groups[7] (Köpp 2019). Among the 400 participants that finally attended, two thirds came from the Anglophone regions and 5% from the diaspora, according to the government (Grand Dialogue National 2019: 4). The ruling party RDPC, some opposition parties (PCRN, PU, PURS, SDF, UDC, UPC) and many civil society organisations supported the dialogue in principle, though at times quite cautiously.[8]

The limited inclusiveness of the dialogue made boycotts and opting-out predictable. The main opposition party, MRC, refused to participate as long as its leader Maurice Kamto was in prison (Foute 2019a). The smaller opposition parties AFP, CPP, MN and PAL withdrew after the first day of

[5] On ethnic and regional politics in Cameroon see Nyamnjoh (1999) and Nyamnjoh and Konings (2003).

[6] AFP= Alliance des Forces Progressistes; CPP= Cameroon People Party; MN= Movement Now; MRC= Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun; PAL= Parti de l'Alliance Libérale; PCRN= Parti Camerounais pour la Réconciliation Nationale; PU= Parti Univers ; PURS = Peuple Uni pour la Rénovation Sociale; RDPC= Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais; SDF= Social Democratic Front; UDC= Union Démocratique du Cameroun; UNDP= Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès; UPC= Union des Populations du Cameroun. All major parties, as well as some minor ones, were therefore invited.

[7] Some separatist leaders (e.g. Ebenezer Akwanga) contradicted the government's claim to have invited them (VOA Afrique 2019). Other important leaders were not "officially" invited at all, e.g. Ayuk Tabe, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in August 2019.

[8] SDF chairman John Fru Ndi called for a reintroduction of federalism and threatened the audience with a walk-out should his party's voiced concerns not be addressed (Agence Cameroun Presse 2020).

the event. AFP leader Alice Sadio considered the dialogue a “hypocritical monologue” dominated and stage-managed by the ruling party (Asen 2019; Kouagheu 2020). Others even described the event as a “congress of the ruling party”, an impression that was reinforced by the fact that the dialogue was held in Yaounde’s “Palais de Congrès”. While a venue for public events, this is also the site of the RDPC headquarters and where it has held its party congresses for the past three decades (Lassaad 2019). The CPP denounced “a show”, intent on assuaging the concerns of the international community. Akere Muna (MN) complained about the pre-selection of the speakers and the agenda (Journal du Cameroun 2019b). Chris Fomunyoh, an Anglophone diaspora intellectual, turned down the offer to chair one of the committees (Newsday Cameroon 2019). Despite Biya’s promise to pardon separatists who would lay down their weapons and participate (Biya 2019), many Anglophone separatist movements (AGC, SCLC, SOCADEF)[9] rejected the dialogue because their leaders were in prison or in exile. The umbrella movement SCLC considered the liberation of Anglophone prisoners (including their leader Ayuk Tabe) and a withdrawal of the army from the Anglophone regions as a precondition for dialogue (Le Monde 2019). It also rejected participation because core demands such as federalism, let alone Anglophone independence, were not on the agenda of discussions. Moreover, it argued that the dialogue should not be a “circus [...] to lure the international community” (Journal du Cameroun 2020). Separatist leader Ebenezer Akwanga (SOCADEF) declared that it was too late for reforms and dialogue, calling for a “comprehensive negotiated settlement on the terms of separation” (Journal du Cameroun 2020). Other groups argued that they would participate only if dialogue would take place outside of Cameroon, assisted by an impartial mediator (Kouagheu 2020).

The EU, France, the AU and the UN Secretary-General Guterres endorsed the initiative, but called on the government to ensure that the process was inclusive and geared to addressing the country’s challenges (Le Monde 2019). This scepticism was amply justified as the dialogue was clearly a top-down mechanism, announced and organised by the government. Biya appointed his Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute to chair the event. Likewise, he had decided beforehand the agenda and the dialogue’s red lines, stating that “the future of our compatriots in the North-West and South-West Regions lies within our Republic. Cameroon will remain one and indivisible”, stressing that the form of the state (federalism, or even separation) would not be debated (Biya 2019). Only decentralisation was on the agenda. Nevertheless, the government created participation mechanisms for opposition parties (Services du Premier Ministre 2020) and an Internet site for the interested general public. The criteria for the inclusion of items to the agenda were unclear, so the chances to influence the agenda by these mechanisms were limited if not non-existent.

When the national dialogue opened on 30 September 2019 the sultan of Bamoun, a traditional leader and heavyweight of the regime, attracted attention when he advocated the limitation of presidential terms (Pigeaud 2020: 211), an unexpected proposition that could have triggered the expansion of the agenda to more fundamental issues. However, the following day the working groups started their discussions in accordance with the preconceived agenda that the government had previously announced. The eight working groups were on (1) multiculturalism and bilingualism, (2) the education system, (3) the judicial system, (4) return of refugees, (5) reconstruction and development of Anglophone regions, (6) disarmament and reintegration of separatists, (7) the diaspora and (8) decentralisation and local development, all pressing topics not only for the Anglophone regions, but for the country as a whole. Recommendations were drawn up and subsequently submitted to the Prime Minister (Grand Dialogue National 2019: 9).

[9] AGC= Ambazonia Governing Council, SCLC=Southern Cameroon Liberation Council; SOCADEF=Southern Cameroon Defence Forces.

Constituting the dialogue's principal *output*, the most important recommendations included accelerated decentralisation, greater local autonomy and a special status for the two Anglophone regions. Some 10–15% of the state budget would be allocated to decentralised collectivities (Grand Dialogue National 2019: 16), regional governors would be directly elected and Cameroon's official name rebranded as "République Unie du Cameroun"[10] (Ewane 2019). Bilingualism in general would have to be promoted and access to public office distributed according to a regional balance (Grand Dialogue National 2019: 10–11). Common law, originating from a British tradition and described as better adapted to the Anglophone regions, would be recognised, and a separate chamber in the Supreme Court would be devoted to it (Grand Dialogue National 2019: 12). The Anglophone education system would be promoted in its present form.[11]

The conclusions were thus more far-reaching than expected, even if many of them just reaffirmed previous commitments or even regulations and institutions that should, in theory (and law), already have existed. Following his re-election in 2018, Biya had already announced deeper decentralisation and the promotion of bilingualism and multiculturalism: "A good number of these concerns and aspirations will be addressed as part of current efforts to accelerate the decentralisation process" and "bilingualism and multiculturalism will continue to be promoted by the commission set up to that end" (Biya 2018). Thus, the dialogue's recommendations on decentralisation[12] and bilingualism[13] were less novel and innovative than they appeared, because they incorporated issues that were on the agenda before, albeit without much ceremony or concrete implementation (International Crisis Group 2019: 10).

At the conclusion of the dialogue on 4 October, the final resolutions were read out. Tellingly, Biya was not present. In a press release, he assured Cameroonians that all recommendations would "be considered attentively and diligently with a view to implementing them, taking into account their relevance and feasibility, as well as the capacities of our country" (Biya 2020). On the previous day and ostensibly as a sign of good will, Biya had announced the release of 333 Anglophone activists from prison. He also ordered the release of opposition leader Maurice Kamto and numerous of his MRC supporters.[14] Opponents of the regime criticised Kamto's late release because it had prevented him from participating in the dialogue (Kouagheu 2020).

As was to be expected, the dialogue's chairman, Prime Minister Dion Ngute, as well as the ruling party RDPC and state-owned media described the dialogue as a success (Frenk 2019). Relatively positive reactions with respect to the envisaged extended autonomy of the regions came from representatives of the Anglophone General Conference, an inter-religious body that had sought to mediate between the separatists and the government (Kouagheu 2020). Moderate Anglophones like SDF chairman John Fru Ndi, well-known opinion leaders like Cabral Libii and church dignitaries also

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[10] In 1972, president Ahidjo changed the constitution, abandoning federalism by establishing a unitary state (République Unie du Cameroun). Anglophone elites decried francophone imperialism already at this point (Nach Mback 2003: 142). In 1984 Biya unilaterally removed "Unie" (united) which was the last reminiscence of a separate history, an act again strongly resented within the Anglophone elite.

[11] This is particularly important as the Anglophone conflict escalated in 2016, when francophone lawyers and teachers were deployed in both Anglophone Regions without respecting Anglophone legal and educational systems. Demonstrations were suppressed in a brutal way by governmental forces (Petrigh 2019: 12).

[12] The National Commission on the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism was established by a decree in January 2017. Its role is to ensure social peace and national unity and to promote national integration and Cameroonian "vivre ensemble" not only in the public service but also in private organisations that receive state subsidies (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon 2017).

[13] Biya established the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development in 2018.

[14] They had been arrested on charges of insurrection during peaceful demonstrations in January 2019 against the results of the presidential election in October 2018 and transferred to a military tribunal.

expressed satisfaction with the promised special status for the Anglophone regions and further decentralisation, but cautioned about the prospects of implementation (RFI 2019a).

In December, Biya signed several laws that took up recommendations of the dialogue, including laws to promote bilingualism[15] and decentralisation.[16] This could be termed the *outcome* dimension. However, the continued dependence of the two regions on the national government was criticised (Chatou 2020). The new law reminded many actors and observers of the never implemented decentralisation guaranteed by the 1996 Constitution (RFI 2019b).[17] Nevertheless, some high-ranking politicians from the Anglophones regions and archbishop emeritus Tumi commented positively on the new law (RFI 2019a).

As for the *impact* of the dialogue on the violent conflict, it had no discernable effect, as violence in the Anglophone zones did not decrease in the following months (International Crisis Group 2020a).[18] Only a few separatist fighters laid down their weapons, as their leaders considered the concessions insufficient and vowed to intensify their struggle (Foute 2019b). The government, for its part, formed local defence forces to combat the “terrorists”, which in turn meant an intensification of the conflict.

The National Inclusive Dialogue in Mali

As in Cameroon, it was Mali’s President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), who announced the *inclusive national dialogue (dialogue national inclusive –DNI)* in Mali (16 April 2019). Conceiving of it as a “major occasion to undertake evaluations and make propositions” (“grand moment d’évaluation et de proposition”) Keita, unlike Biya, justified its necessity in light of the strong demand from civil society and the political class. The DNI had the comprehensive objective “to establish a rigorous diagnosis of the problems facing Mali and their causes” in order “to propose solutions with a timeline and an action plan for implementation” (TDR du DNI). Mali had been suffering from a multidimensional crisis and civil war since the declaration of independence by the Tuareg state of Azawad[19] in the north of Mali in 2012 and its joint insurrection with radical Islamist groups. While the former were accommodated through a peace accord signed in 2015, the sphere of influence of the latter progressively expanded. Despite the presence of the UN mission MINUSMA and a French counter-terrorism operation, the security situation had constantly deteriorated since 2017. By July 2020, some 450,000 Malians were internally displaced or had fled the country (UNHCR 2020). Mass

[15] The two official languages are equivalent (Art. 2). Therefore, all legislative texts must be published in both languages (Art. 24) and every citizen has the right to communicate and receive documents in both languages in all public administrations (Art. 15) (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon 2019a).
[16] The law on decentralisation confers a special status on the North-West and South-West regions based on their linguistic specificity and their historical heritage. This status includes recognition of the specific features of the Anglophone educational and legal system (Art. 3). The regions are governed by elected governments (Art.6) and enjoy administrative and financial autonomy in local and regional matters (Art.8). They receive financial resources from the state. The regions are granted competences in the fields of economic, social, health, education, culture and sport (Art. 17) (Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon 2019b).
[17] Among other things, this concerns the senate representing the regions, which was legally introduced by a revision of the constitution in 1996. The first senate was established only 17 years later in 2013, but de facto its impact is minimal as it just rubber-stamps governmental decisions (Gatsi 2015: 1630).
[18] Some experts attribute this to the fact that the most important separatist leaders did not take part in the dialogue, as many are in diaspora or in exile (Kouagheu 2020).
[19] The Tuareg are an ethnic minority in Mali. Advocating more autonomy or federalism, they consider themselves marginalised and disadvantaged.

demonstrations against the ineffective government had become common, ultimately contributing to a military coup that toppled Keita in August 2020.

President Keita had presented the dialogue as a “constructive Malian approach to end the crisis”, which aimed to involve as many Malians as possible (Présentation du dialogue national inclusif 2019). A wide range of political parties, traditional authorities, religious authorities and civil society actors were invited. Some civil society actors, traditional and religious authorities and political parties (ADP-Maliba, Codem, Paréna, RPM)[20] endorsed the dialogue (Diallo 2019a). More than 180 out of Mali’s 207 parties eventually took part. But as in Cameroon, a handful of important opposition parties did not participate because they saw the dialogue as a means for the government to reassert its power (Mali Demain 2019). Most notably, the Front pour la Sauvegarde de la Démocratie (FSD), an umbrella of some 30 opposition parties (CNID, FAD, FCD, MODEC, MPR, URD, etc.[21]) led by opposition leader Soumaila Cissé boycotted the event. Having participated in the preparatory meetings designed to fix the terms of reference for the dialogue, the FSD claimed that none of its propositions had been taken on board, denouncing the dialogue as “pure political communication” and “a staged spectacle that is resolutely contrary to the interests of Mali” (Kane 2019). Two former Prime Ministers, Cheick Modibo Diarra and Soumana Sacko and their respective parties also opposed the dialogue (Sissoko 2019). Sy Kadiatou Sow, who already in 2017 opposed IBK’s planned constitutional amendment, also rejected participation, along with her platform of civil society organisations, trade unions and political movements (Anw Ko Mali Dron) (Ouattara 2019).

The participation of Mali’s armed rebel groups of the Coalition des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA), which had signed the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2015, was unclear for a long time. Their hesitation had to do with the fact that IBK had previously insinuated that some provisions of the peace accord could be reconsidered within the framework of the dialogue (Jeune Afrique 2019). In the end, the CMA took part, but asserting that “dialogue [is] neither the ideal space nor the legal place to re-discuss the agreement” (RFI 2019c). The leaders of the jihadist groups were not invited to the forum. This was a source of criticism because dialogue with these groups had been a recommendation of a previous forum, the National Conference on Reconciliation held in 2017 within the framework of the Algiers peace process. All of this meant that key political players did not participate or only on the condition that their vested interests were not touched.

In contrast to Cameroon, Mali’s dialogue was not a single event but a multi-level process moving upwards from the local to the regional and national level (Diallo 2019a). Decentralised, smaller dialogues in the 605 municipalities began on 7 October 2019 and were organised by the prefects and sub-prefects (Diallo 2019a). They included representatives of the central, regional and local administrations, parliament, political parties, traditional and religious authorities, women’s and parents’ organisations, etc. The bottom-up process meant that no less than 32,451 recommendations were issued (Mali Demain 2019; Diallo 2019a). Meetings with the diaspora were also held in cooperation with the embassies and consulates. Interested parties were also able to participate via social networks and a dedicated website (1.3m visitors and 5m contributions) (Mali Demain 2019; Présentation du dialogue national inclusif 2019). The themes and rules of the

[20]ADP-Maliba=Alliance démocratique pour la paix ; Codem=Convergence pour le développement du Mali ; Paréna=Parti pour la renaissance nationale ; RPM=Rassemblement pour le Mali.

[21] CNID=Congrès national d’initiative démocratique; FAD= Front africain pour le développement; FCD= Force citoyenne pour la démocratie; MODEC= Mouvement pour un Destin Commun; MPR= Mouvement patriotique pour le renouveau; URD= Union pour la république et la démocratie.

decentralised dialogue formats and the national dialogue were defined in cooperation with the participants (Comité National d'Organisation 2019: 18). The government insisted that "no subject shall be taboo", but de facto discarded a number subjects from the debate. Thus all participants were asked to endorse the 2015 peace agreement and to accept the constitutional principle of secularism and the territorial integrity of the country (Diallo 2019a).

The dialogue at the national level took place from 14 to 22 December 2019 in Bamako. Attended by some 3,000 people, the starting and closing ceremonies took place in the Palais de la culture Amadou Hampaté Ba (Mali Demain 2019), where the National Conference in 1991 had taken place (Massicotte 2009: 10). Approximately 1,800 delegates participated subsequently in the actual working groups that had been set up by a government-appointed Organisation Committee (Diallo 2019b): peace, security and social cohesion; policies and institutions; governance; social affairs; economic and financial affairs; and culture, youth and sport. For three days, the commissions worked on the respective topics and analysed the recommendations from the local and regional level (Comité National d'Organisation 2019: 16–26). The closing ceremony on 22 December 2019 was attended by President IBK and his predecessor Amadou Toumani Touré (RFI 2019d).

The most important results of the dialogue or *output* were vows for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Accord, a call for a more appropriate mandate for the UN's Stabilisation Mission to Mali (MINUSMA), the disarmament of armed groups, the restoration of state authority throughout the national territory and dialogue with Islamist leaders Mamadou Koufa and Iyad Ag Ghali (Rapport final de la réunion au niveau national 2019). In addition, it was recommended that long-delayed legislative elections should be held before May 2020, a new electoral organisation body should be established and, finally, that the constitution should be modified by means of a referendum to align the constitution with the provisions of the peace accord. Various reforms regarding the territorial administration and the security and justice sector should be accelerated (ibid.: 51–54). Compared to Cameroon the *output* of Mali's dialogue caused little controversy. Its conclusions were relatively predictable and articulated a consensus on basic questions, even though the absence of important political players weakened its outcomes in the eyes of some observers (Sidibé 2019).

Contrary to the recommendations of the DNI, no follow-up commission was set up to monitor the implementation of the conclusions. In terms of the *outcome* dimension, and unlike in Cameroon, Mali's government and parliament have not issued new regulations and legislation that can be linked to the recommendations of the DNI, making it difficult to assess its outcome. However, President Keita subsequently affirmed his willingness to explore negotiations and dialogue with the radical jihadist groups, a key recommendation of the DNI.

As in Cameroon, the *impact* of the inclusive national dialogue appeared limited, at best. The security situation continued to deteriorate (International Crisis Group 2020b). If negotiations with the jihadists began, they had no discernable effect. On the positive side, parliamentary elections were held in late March and mid-April, although under difficult circumstances and amid the abduction of opposition leader Soumaila Cissé. The official election results showed a large victory for the ruling party, but caused significant controversy and ultimately led to mass demonstrations. A broad-based coalition of political parties, civil society and religious authorities (Mouvement du 5 juin - Rassemblement des forces patriotiques, M5-RPF) called for the resignation of the government and led to a massive crisis of government (Kane 2020). While there seemed to be no direct link among the main protagonists, the protests contributed to a coup d'état on 18 August 2020, which was widely welcomed by protesters and civil society groups in Bamako. It was perhaps the ultimate proof

that the dialogue had failed to produce the desired results of restoring trust in the government and the functioning of Mali's state institutions.

Historicity and political dialogue: connecting past and present

The 2019 political dialogues were not the first of their kind in Mali and Cameroon. Both countries have been the scene of important, albeit different historical precedents. We argue that these previous gatherings have informed the current-day expectations and behaviour of political actors: both as precedents and, equally important, for the political consequences that flowed from these events and that shaped Mali's and Cameroon's subsequent political trajectories. In Mali, political dialogue in the guise of a national conference set the political system on a pathway towards substantive political liberalisation. In Cameroon, regime opponents had similar ambitions, but were outwitted and repressed by the Biya regime, which subsequently engaged in a process of regime closure and a consolidation of its autocratic power under the façade of formal electoral democracy.

Particularly important as a reference point is the model of the Sovereign National Conference as organised or conceded by embattled rulers between 1990 and 1991 in Benin, Gabon, Congo, Mali, Togo, Niger and Zaire, among others. The significance of these assemblies partly derived from the stunning outcome of the first one, which took place in Benin in February 1990 and was widely followed in the rest of Africa. The participants declared the conference to be sovereign, suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament and made plans for multiparty elections.[22] The auto-proclamation of sovereignty was a particularly striking move, as delegates claimed to represent "the nation in its entirety", even if they were mostly educated members of a largely urban civil and political society (Robinson 1994: 575). The events in Benin sent shockwaves throughout the region, inspiring pro-democracy campaigners elsewhere while putting besieged incumbents on guard that conceding a national conference may ultimately become a political boomerang. The demonstration and diffusion effects were clear enough.

What is the political significance of these events and what can we learn from them for the present generation of political dialogue and similar formats?

First, the countries where national conferences were organised had one thing in common: the wholesale absence of political competition even within the ruling (single) party. Instead, these autocratic regimes had resorted to participatory elements such as mass rallies, elections and referenda to provide a modicum of mobilisation and participation. Ten of the 11 countries where national conferences were organised in the early 1990s have therefore been described as "plebiscitary regimes" (Bratton/Van der Walle 1997: 174). According to these authors, the national conferences were consistent with the countries' plebiscitary heritage, providing a degree of "voice" that seemed appealing to both rulers and their opponents, although for different reasons. Incumbents hoped that ceremonial participation, along with a few cosmetic concessions, might be enough to placate opponents and to revive their own declining authority and legitimacy. Opponents, on the other hand, were intent on turning the discussions into an opportunity. To them, the key was to seize the limited political space that the plebiscitary tradition had provided to change the political rules of the game and press for liberalisation (ibid.). In hindsight, the diverse and variable outcomes of these conferences across Francophone Africa suggest that the calculus of both camps had not been entirely mistaken in considering a national conference as an opportunity to outflank and upset political adversaries. In some countries, the incumbent managed to retain control over the event and

[22] In these elections, an opposition candidate defeated incumbent president Mathieu Kérékou, a former coup leader who had taken power in 1972.

ultimately preempt political change of any kind (e.g. Zaire). In others, such as Benin, the opposition swept over the regime, while in a third group (i.e. Congo-Brazzaville, Niger) the degree of change was substantial, but nonetheless fell short of Benin's spectacular outcome. Possibly because they were without precedent the organisers made sure to create a solemn atmosphere infused with moral authority, not least by choosing (arch-)bishops to chair the gathering.

In their analysis of the national conference phenomenon Bratton and van der Walle take a long-term view of African politics that stresses the institutional legacies of pre-transition politics, which shape the modalities of political participation but also the calculus of political actors. By the same logic, the outcome of national conferences and the ensuing transition trajectories since 1990 have created and added another layer of political knowledge, practices and experiences that inform the behaviour of present-day political actors. As pointed out by Seely, three types of legacies flow from the early 1990s transition period: first, the institutions that were established by the transition leadership; second, the strategies of political elites in the pursuit of their political interests; and third, the delimitations and contours of political space, debate and decision-making (Seely 2005).

In Mali, the national conference and the subsequent transition established the foundations for a new political regime that showed many characteristics of democratic rule. In Cameroon, by contrast, the Biya regime had preempted a national conference entirely and with it the risk that political dynamics might evade its control. It conceded the introduction of a formal electoral democracy while subsequently restoring its authority through a mix of repression, manipulation and the demobilisation of political and civil society (Pommerolle 2008; Albaugh 2011).

Mali's National Conference

Mali's national conference had the particularity of being the only one in Africa that was preceded – indeed rendered possible – by a coup d'état. By intervening in the political realm amid popular demonstrations against the regime, the military had aligned behind pro-democracy forces against the autocratic regime of Moussa Traoré. In every other African case, the organisation of a political assembly was itself part and parcel of the struggle, not to mention the deliberative character and pro-democracy outcome of such a gathering.

After deposing President Traoré, the coup leaders promised a quick return to civilian rule and convened the national conference (29 July to 12 August 1991), where some 2,000 representatives negotiated the institutional structures that would form the core of the country's democracy, including a draft constitution that was adopted by referendum in 1992. This symbolised Mali's break with autocratic and centralised rule, building "the groundwork for a new republic with the former leaders of the democratic opposition at the helm of state power" (CERDES 1998: 45). Elected in 1992, President Alpha Oumar Konaré upheld some elements of deliberative democracy when he institutionalised the so-called "Éspace d'Interpellation Démocratique", question and answer assemblies on the national and subnational level. Political participation declined in the late 1990s and a new chapter of Malian politics was opened in 2002 with the election of Amadou Toumani Touré, the 1992 coup leader. Under him, a new form of "consensus politics" emerged that effectively obliterated any opposition, hollowing out the young democracy and paving the way for the 2012 crisis.

With the political breakdown in 2012 in mind, it is tempting to dismiss Mali's experiment with deliberative democracy beginning in 1990 as bogus or even meaningless. Yet, this would underestimate the political and cultural depth of change that has taken root throughout the three decades since the end of the dictatorship. Both the national conference and the constitution-making

process have instituted broad-based participatory processes of consultation and deliberation. These have entrenched popular expectations about appropriate channels and forums for broad-based participation and deliberation. As Wing argues, the national conference and the transition "helped to embed the democratic ideals of dialogue and debate in contemporary Malian political culture", with subsequent formats of dialogue and deliberation embedding "a culture of participation into the political arena" (Wing 2008: 62f.)

This argument is not in contradiction with the decline of political participation. Malians show a relatively robust demand for democracy, but are unsatisfied with the supply side, i.e. its performance and effectiveness (Coulibaly et al. 2020). This is echoed by Malians who frequently demand deliberative processes, stating that these are a normative premise for the legitimacy and popular acceptance of political decisions. For example, ahead of the Conférence d'entente nationale, held in the framework of the Algiers peace treaty (27 March–2 April 2017), Malian observers argued:

> …the National Reconciliation Conference must be approached as an inclusive process building on the various perspectives of all regional, socio-occupational, institutional and political horizons, at all levels of the country starting from the smallest villages and fractions, in order to foster the emergence of a shared vision both of the crisis that is blocking progress in our country as well as of prospective exit strategies. (Sy et al. 2016: 6, trans. authors)

This call echoed lessons from past episodes, when Malian elites tried to impose their will on issues that mattered to a significant part of the public. In 2012, for example, President Touré had sought to change the 1992 constitution, but was challenged by demonstrators not only on substantive, but also on procedural grounds. Demonstrators rejected the amendments because their top-down imposition was antithetical to the spirit of broad-based participatory politics that had brought the 1992 constitution into being (Wing 2015). Similar events occurred in 2016–2017, when large social movements in Bamako preempted the government's plan to rewrite the constitution on the grounds of insufficient popular consultation.

Mali provides numerous examples of dialogue formats at all levels of the polity. Dialogue events in one form or the other are convened regularly, especially since the onset of the 2012 crisis, on a wide range of issues such as the national consultations on decentralisation (2013), the crisis in northern Mali (also in 2013), the Conference on National Cohesion in 2017 (Conférence d'Entente Nationale), up to the inclusive national dialogue in 2019.[23] The institutionalisation of these formats and practices is underscored by the fact that even the coup leaders of August 2020 organised a national concertation process to define the framework and parameters of a future transition to civilian rule. One assumes that in so doing they were following less their preferences than complying with social expectations and norms that have taken root in Mali's political and civil society.

Dialogue is also frequent at the subnational level (Sy et al. 2016). This is the case when specific problems affect certain regions and locales, but also as part of wider national processes, as was the case with the sub-national consultations within the framework of the DNI or in 2014, when a national reconciliation commission was launched that held hundreds of hearings throughout the country. Some observers argue that the Malian penchant for dialogue has roots that can be traced back to the Mande Charter in the 13th century.[24] The influence of this history may be real enough, but in present-day Mali it is arguably the national conference of 1991 that serves as at point of reference in the public debate. As regards the 2019 dialogue, several political formations alluded directly or indirectly to 1991. Some political activists expressed the expectation for "a highly participatory and inclusive

[23] For additional examples of a range of dialogues in Mali since 2012, see Sy et al. 2016: 10, 23.
[24] As it said in Bambara, "sigi ka fo ye damu ye" (dialogue is a virtue).

democratic exercise, autonomy for the organisation and the conduct of the process, its sovereign character and recommendations whose application will be binding” (Diamoutene 2019). This was very much a summary of the core features of the national conference in 1991 (Sy et al. 2016: 24). But this was precisely what the government explicitly opposed when Prime Minister Cissé argued that the dialogue “is by no means a sovereign national conference, much less the preparation of any political transition” (KAS 2020).

All of this is not to suggest that most dialogues in Mali are or were of substantive quality or had meaningful consequences. Indeed, in many cases they did not. But it seems indisputable that they cohere around a set of popular expectations regarding how political decision-making should be organised and structured, especially outside the realm of institutional and electoral politics. This is underscored by opinion polls showing that a vast majority of Malian respondents reacted positively to the announced dialogue, with 78% expecting that the DNI would have a positive impact (FES 2020: 58).

The Tripartite Conference in Cameroon

Cameroon has a different political history. On its present territory there existed a number of precolonial hierarchical states, but all were of rather small size. Some institutions such as the fondoms in the Western savannah practiced forms of dialogue and consensus-oriented deliberation. However, the multitude of “traditional” institutions makes it difficult to trace dialogue formats and inclusion to a somewhat distant past. Cameroon’s colonial history was particularly violent and ended with a nationalist UPC rebellion that was harshly repressed first by the French mandate authorities and later by the government of newly independent Cameroon (Mbembe 1996). The hotly debated history of reunification of the British and French mandate territories in 1961 by referendum was preceded by an elite gathering, the conference of Foumban, which was organised and dominated by the government of French-speaking East Cameroon. The UPC rebellion was not crushed until 1971. In the following year President Amadou Ahidjo took the decision to abandon federalism by referendum, a move that was announced only a few weeks before the vote. Cameroon, for most of its history, did not offer institutional anchors for dialogue processes. However, the emergence of a pro-democracy movement that expanded in the early 1990s opened a window of opportunity for unprecedented discussions about the structure and governance of the state.

Beginning in early 1990, a phase of intense regime contestation led to well-coordinated efforts to block public life during the so-called “operation dead cities”. Its aim was to force President Biya, in power since 1982, to hold a sovereign national conference, a call he rejected. After months of ongoing protest, Biya eventually ordered his Prime Minister to call a “trilateral conference” (*Tripartite*) of state representatives, independent personalities and political parties. The offer was a big disappointment to the opposition, which had hoped for a national conference similar to the ones in other Francophone states. Three smaller opposition parties boycotted the Tripartite when their pre-conditions were not met. Participating opposition parties twice walked out for procedural reasons. Although the conference, chaired by Prime Minister Sadou Hayatou,[25] included representatives from opposition parties and civil society, it was dominated by delegates from the ruling party RDPC. Moreover, the agenda and rules for the conference were determined and tightly controlled by the regime (Boulaga 1997; Takougang and Krieger 1998). Only two items were on the agenda: access of opposition parties to the state media, and the electoral law (Mehler 1993: 322). Still, most of the

[25] The position was created earlier that same year to shield President Biya from popular pressures. Hayatou, of noble descent and coming from the North (Garoua), was the last non-anglophone to hold this position.

remaining party leaders signed the final “Yaoundé declaration”, which ended the economically costly “operation dead cities” campaign in exchange for the end of extra-legal military crackdowns. One of the major parties of the time, the UNDP[26] experienced an internal rift over participation in the conference. The coordination of opposition parties broke down, and the six non-signatory parties – including the SDF – were represented as radicals by the government. Signatories like the Chairman of the UDC, Ndam Njoya, justified themselves by claiming that they needed to prove that they were not thugs (“casseurs”) (Mehler 1993: 276). The splitting of the opposition and the abandonment of a joint plan for a sovereign national conference were therefore major results of the Tripartite in Cameroon.

Subsequent events confirmed the outcome of the Tripartite. While the first presidential elections under formal democratic rules in 1992 saw mass mobilisation by both civil society groups and the opposition, the result was manipulated and confirmed Biya as President. Government repression of the radical opposition proved effective, leading important opposition parties to subsequently boycott legislative elections (including by the SDF). This allowed for the election of more moderate opposition politicians and paved the way for the co-optation of opposition parties (MDR, UNDP, UPC) by the regime. Biya decided to pursue a slow and non-participatory constitution-making process that produced a new Constitution in 1996.

How has the regime survived and even superficially stabilised since the mid-1990s? The answer is multifaceted. First, the ethnicisation from above effectively split the population and the political elite. Second, the regime managed to demobilise civil society and youth movements, partially alienating them from the political system (see e.g. Fokwang 2016). Third, material rewards, partly via full control over bureaucratic positions (Hansen 2010) played into the hand of the regime. Oil rents provided Biya with significant discretionary power (Arriola 2013: 124), but Cameroon has benefited from the fact that its economy is more diversified than those of most neighbouring countries, where the effect of volatile oil prices also led to a shrinkage of patronage power in recent years (Chad, Congo, Gabon). Fourth, already after the failed coup of 1984, when Biya narrowly escaped a violent removal from power, he made sure that the top military level and some specialised forces of repression lend their full support to the regime. Fifth, the international environment was a final factor: while in the 1990s it was strongly believed that French support was decisive in keeping Biya in power, this discourse has changed over time. France is no longer perceived as a potential saviour. Instead, some rallying around the flag was achieved when a new narrative saw a plot in the combined efforts of internal and external enemies to topple the regime, allegedly now even comprising Paris (Pommerolle 2015).

This demobilisation strategy was more or less directly related to the conduct and outcome of the Tripartite. All major Cameroonian political actors learnt lessons from the event and the subsequent regime closure, though – just as in Mali – it was embedded in a broader history of repression, splits and exclusion (Pommerolle 2008; Fokwang 2016). Ever since then, Biya has consolidated his almost uncontested power through the use of state patronage, a heavy dose of repression and intimidation, all under conditions of formal electoral democracy. This is not to suggest that Biya lacks political authority and legitimacy. In 2015 an opinion poll suggested that 70% of Cameroon’s citizens had a favourable view of President Biya (Afrobarometer 2015). In 2018, some 45% of Cameroon’s Francophone citizens thought of their political system as a democracy, but this view was shared by only 12% of Anglophone citizens (Lazar 2019). While these numbers do not reflect public opinion at the moment of the national dialogue, they still suggest that Biya enjoys a comfortable level of support among the Francophone majority. It is also the case that Francophone segments of political

[26] The UNDP became the most important opposition in the National Assembly when the SDF boycotted the 1992 elections. It was subsequently co-opted by the regime, lost appeal and now belongs to the “presidential majority”. In the 2020 elections it gained support and is now credited with 7 seats (in second place after RDPC).

and civil society have generally shown little empathy for the cause of the Anglophone minority. This did not change with the eruption of the conflict, and the threat of secession may actually have contributed to closing Francophone ranks behind Biya on this issue. In organising the national dialogue the president may have run little risk of generating unwelcome alignments between Francophone and Anglophone regime opponents.

This somewhat detailed account of the main precursor events allows us to explain the differences in expectations and behaviour in Mali's and Cameroon's political arenas – while the 2019 editions of national dialogues at first sight expose some similarities.

Comparison and Conclusion

Our historically informed analysis on preceding key events allows us to stress the differences between the two cases that otherwise show many similarities when it comes to our variables of inclusiveness, agenda-setting, quality of dialogue and outcome/implementation. Let us first proceed in comparing the two events in 2019 through the prism of our analytical framework. This results in the following descriptive and analytical summary (Table 2).

Table 2: Properties of the dialogue processes in Cameroon and Mali 2019

	Cameroon	**Mali**
Inclusiveness Invited participants	400–600 delegates, broad and inclusive in theory, but in practice not so much, because of the participation conditions and external circumstances	1800 delegates, broad selection of political forces, including northern rebels but no separatist groups
Boycott / leaving	Anglophone separatist groups, MRC (main opposition party) / PAL, AFP, CPP Movement Now	Modibo Diarra (RpDM) and Soumana Sacko (CNAS Faso Hèrè) (influential former prime ministers), Soumaila Cissé (main opponent) and the FSD (a coalition of 30 opposition parties: l'URD, FCD, CNID FYT, MODEC, MPR, FAD, etc.); Sy Kadiatou Sow's platform ANW KO MALI DRON (with several civil society organisations, trade unions and political movements, l'Adema Association, Fare Anka Wuli)
Top-down or bottom-up Fixed agenda and participation mechanism	Preparatory discussions via internet, but unclear criteria of inclusion of items	Part of a decentralised process with further dialogues on a local level, fairly open. Additionally internet forum
Important issues not on the agenda	Federalism or secession/independence not on the agenda	Red lines: the principle of secularism and unity of the country, engagement for the application of the peace agreement of 2015 and constitutional reform
Dialogue Quality/openness of discussions	Work in committees fixed in advance	Committees fixed in advance, but free choice for participants
Result (output)	Conclusions more far-reaching than expected: name of the Republic, far-reaching	Conclusions merely reaffirmed basic consensus: organisation of

	decentralisation, new bilingual policies, though much of this may just reaffirm what, in theory, should already have existed	legislative elections, pledges for better governance, etc. Controversial point (Algiers Peace Accord) was fixed beforehand (no re-negotiation)
Implementation (outcome)	Two important laws in December 2018; but not yet put into practice by mid-2020	

The Malian case was more inclusive at the outset, but faced broad-based boycotts/walk-outs by opponents, not unlike in the Cameroonian case. The agenda-setting was much less top-down in Mali, but red lines were as important as in Cameroon. The quality of the dialogue process was in both cases limited, as was the implementation of results.

A closer look might still be important. Cameroon's authorities even invited the leaders of Anglophone separatist groups, but de facto the participation conditions and external circumstances (fear of persecution, in exile or in prison) did not allow them to attend the forum. In Mali, the organisation committee invited a wide range of political and social players, but excluded radical Islamist leaders, whose invitation was considered taboo by the government and external donors. In both cases major opposition parties did not participate.

While in both cases the ultimate solutions of secession/multidimensional crises were not on the agenda, the preparatory process of agenda-setting and the openness of discussion in Mali were less stage-managed than in Cameroon. Even if both cases involved participation mechanisms in the preparation phase, at least for Cameroon it remains unclear how they were incorporated in the final dialogue.

The outcome of the Cameroonian dialogue can be considered as strongly shaped by the government, even if the results are more far-reaching than expected. In Mali the recommendations stayed more or less in the scope of the Algiers treaty (which was one of the red lines), except for the negotiations with Islamist groups.

A final look at the two events should reveal whether the forums had a perceptible impact. Both produced a list of recommendations; this can be considered the *output* dimension. An *outcome* perspective, in contrast, would look primarily into changes of legislation, political and institutional reform, opening the government for the inclusion of opposition members or an amnesty for armed opponents. Usually, it takes time to translate conclusions of an elite gathering into legal texts. In parallel to the dialogue, confrontations on the ground may escalate or diminish. This gives some insights into the *impact* perspective.

Clearly, the pace of turning recommendations into legal texts in Cameroon was extraordinarily quick. But Cameroonians know from long experience that laws are not necessarily meaningful. An increase of violence in both Mali and Cameroon after the end of the dialogue processes can be interpreted as a lack of (positive) impact. However, it is difficult to attribute this turn to the holding of dialogue processes in the first place as armed groups were de facto not participants of dialogue. What we can conclude is that the attributed value and the high cost of the events did not pay off.

In recent years, political dialogue and similar formats have become a routine part of politics in a number of primarily Francophone African countries. These are triggered by political contestations that incite – mostly autocratic – rulers to try to diffuse tensions by organising a political dialogue. In so doing, they deploy a rhetoric of national "consensus"-seeking, which is said to permit the country to achieve lofty goals such as the consolidation of peace, democracy, reconciliation, progress and

unity. Accordingly, dialogue becomes a national duty to counter partisan, narrow-minded and anti-patriotic forces. At the same time such gatherings are used for theatrical self-presentation.

To explore this new or rather re-invented phenomenon, our focused comparison of two recent examples suggests important and substantive differences.

Regarding the rhetoric of inclusiveness and broad-based participation, it is clear that this purported objective is neither realistic nor possibly intended by the organisers. In Cameroon, hardline separatists and the closest challenger of President Biya were behind bars, in exile or in hiding. A number of political parties decided to boycott the event. In Mali, with its long-standing tradition of inclusion, an inclusive approach was also not fully embraced, as the dialogue excluded one notable actor, the radical armed Islamists, and this despite the fact that a previous national gathering – the 2017 conférence d'entente nationale – had recommended engaging with this group. Remarkably enough, the 2019 dialogue renewed calls for dialogue with the jihadists, a step that the government began to explore in the aftermath of the event, although it remains unclear whether the government was following the recommendation or was compelled by the increasingly bleak situation on the battlefield. Northern Mali's armed Tuareg rebels participated in the dialogue, but only after the promise was made that their interests – enshrined in the 2015 peace accord – would not be threatened. The main opposition parties declined to participate after the government allegedly prevented them from shaping the meeting's agenda. Although far less stage-managed than in Cameroon, Mali's dialogue was ultimately insufficiently inclusive to generate a degree of legitimacy for the event and its deliberations. There was little success in achieving the official aim of "communicative action" to lower tensions within the country's political elite, much less any alleviation of the structural causes of the crisis. Perhaps it was for this reason that the outcomes and recommendations did not reflect any fresh and substantive ideas. As a result, the dialogue had no impact on violent conflict (given the absence of the jihadists) or the political crisis that had been brewing in Bamako throughout the year. Mass rallies by a cross-section of political, religious and civil society actors over the course of 2020 demonstrated the heightened precariousness of the government's authority, ultimately drawing in external mediators (Ecowas) and the Malian military into Bamako's political arena.

Cameroon's national dialogue was characterised by limited transparency, a severely restricted space for open debate and ultimately pre-determined outcomes, some of which had already been announced by the president prior to the dialogue. At least in theory, some of these were far-reaching. However, given that they were fixed in advance, they constituted the maximum opening that the regime was willing to consider, clearly excluding key points that opponents and regime challengers sought to impose as a minimum concession, such as federalism. The intended topics for discussion during the dialogue were limited from the outset.

Contextualising political dialogue against the background of dialogue-like precedents in the early 1990s, we find that present actors and processes, including specific forms and locations of political theatre, are informed and shaped by previous historical experiences. This is because these events were critical junctures that set the countries on distinct and clearly defined political trajectories. Mali embraced a democratisation process despite widespread poverty, in the process embedding and deepening norms that force decision-makers to embrace what are widely considered as appropriate political processes. In Cameroon, by contrast, the early 1990s were the high watermark of democratic aspirations, which the Biya regime rolled back forcefully, skilfully and systematically over the subsequent years and decades. Regime closure, political exclusion and a general demobilisation of political participation by political and civil society have been the hallmarks of this regime.

While this comparison has produced some important insights into the similarities and differences of political dialogue, it cannot be but a first step in analysing a re-emergent form of politics, albeit one that often has old political and cultural roots. Our conclusions are preliminary and somewhat speculative:

From a ruler's perspective, political dialogue involves a tacit acknowledgement of an impending or severe crisis, although many will be hard pressed to avoid such terms. By convening a national dialogue, rulers aim at lowering political tensions that may ultimately threaten their authority. They want to be seen as extending a hand to opponents and other groups in society by deploying the symbolism and language of unity, inclusiveness and broad-based participation for the higher good of the state and the nation. The reality may be quite different, considering that even in relatively open societies such as Mali's, actual possibilities of dialogue to redefine political norms, rules and procedures may be limited, not to mention the very circumscribed autocratic context of Cameroon, where earnest dialogue is a remote perspective. And yet, dialogue formats are a political reality that should not be dismissed out of hand as thinly veiled stage-managed and meaningless political theatre. As an initiative that is usually launched by embattled rulers, dialogue almost certainly has – at least – a political utility function.

The same may be true for those non-state actors who decide to participate. The idea that opponents and others are drawn into dialogue for the sake of publicity, financial or political benefits might be appealing, but could be incomplete. No doubt all of this may be part of the game, though we found less evidence for these elements than we had expected. Co-optation, for example, has not been a salient feature in either Mali or Cameroon, though hidden financial incentives of one form or another cannot be excluded.

We also tend to conclude that historical precedents and the wider features of a given political regime inform what participants will expect from a dialogue. In Cameroon, for example, the Biya regime may well have played cynical games when it came to the possible participation or not of separatist insurgents and the main opposition party – possibly to no-one's surprise. The obvious curiosity of national private media might be an indicator that not everything can be planned, that there remains an element of non-predictability. In fact, the national conferences in the 1990s themselves are proof that elite gatherings can create surprises, both for rulers and their opponents.

Beyond these tactical considerations by the main stakeholders, political dialogue may have a larger political function for audiences in the broader society. From this perspective, tactics, manoeuvres and outcomes may actually be of secondary importance. What really matters is that such an event takes place; the importance lies with the event in its own right. The rhetoric and symbols surrounding dialogue and its purported necessity may strike a chord among diverse groups in society, possibly politically and culturally, appealing to notions of unity, community and consensus that may be difficult to reconcile with formal, institutional politics. However, such hypotheses await further exploration through comparative and in-depth research that could further probe the rationales of political actors involved in dialogue, but also the expectations and imaginaries that local populations may cultivate with respect to this political practice. This paper is but a first step for a research agenda on a largely undefined political object.

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