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A portrait of Pr Jean-Emmanuel PONDJ, a man with glasses, wearing a suit and tie, looking directly at the camera.

## **Education and Dialogue**

**The Best Tools for Genuine  
Nation Building**

# EDUCATION AND DIALOGUE THE BEST TOOLS FOR GENUINE NATION BUILDING

*By Professor Jean-Emmanuel PONDI\**

**N**ever in the modern history of popular emancipation has “not going to school” been used as a winning strategy to attain the full emancipation of a people.

Let us be clear from the onset. As I acknowledged in a reflection published as early as December 22nd, 2016 – for a crisis which started on November 21st 2016, many of the claims voiced by our Anglophone compatriots were and remain both understandable and valid.

Indeed, more respect is due for the constitutionally-derived linguistic provisions, by turning into daily practice the notion of equality of status between English and French – in that order in our fundamental text. The same holds true for the necessity to secure free and open access to meritorious Anglophones at all levels of the high decision-making circles of the public and private domains of the State. In the same vain, greater attention should certainly be paid to the

uniqueness of the historical path that has brought East and West Cameroon together. This singularity should be manifested by the preservation of the two-distinct official cultural heritages of the concerned populations.

More importantly perhaps, political promises and commitments made in the 1960’s and 1970’s ought to be kept today with more rigour. Contrary to the belief often expressed by many Cameroonians, I am absolutely convinced that politicians who last long in that capacity are those who are committed to truth telling.

Today it is my belief that the issue of federalism ought no longer to be considered as a taboo subject, in as much as it is gaining ground in the minds and hearts of a growing number of Cameroonians, as a realistic solution to our common present crisis.

As a staunch Pan-Africanist however, it stands to reason that I do not support any move that advocates secession in Cameroon or

anywhere else in Africa. The truth is that I have personally been to Eritrea twice and to South Sudan and North Sudan three times. I can therefore rely on what I saw.

Having sketched my positions concerning these aspects of the “Anglophone crisis” – for lack of a better term, - since I believe that all Cameroonians are affected by this situation one way or the other, I would now like to focus on a related topic which seems equally relevant: the place and the importance of school in the dynamics of nation- building and the role truthful dialogue can play to consolidate our national unity.

## SCHOOL AS A MAJOR TOOL FOR POPULAR EMANCIPATION AND NATION BUILDING

A quick glance into the rear-view mirror of the recent history of the battle for human emancipation informs us that, as a general rule, the disadvantaged populations

always tends to mobilize themselves for a fight in their collective determination “to secure a better access to education”, and not the way around.

In the United States of America for instance, the landmark decision of the US Supreme Court known as *Brown vs Board of Education* (of Topeka in the state of Kansas), rendered on 17th of May 1954, overruled another previous US Supreme Court decision known to legal experts as *Plessy vs Ferguson* of 1896, which upheld, as valid, the application of racial discrimination in the state of Louisiana.

Standing at opposite ends to that infamous 1896 US Supreme Court ruling, the 1954 decision (also recorded as decision n°347 US 483) officially declared the practice of racial segregation in all Kansas schools, as totally unconstitutional. The US Supreme Court decision *Bolling vs Sharpe* extended this prescription to the entire country in 1955. By so doing, the new ruling opened the road to updated knowledge, critical thinking and to the socio-economic insertion of the “Black Americans” into the American Dream. From the “Brain power” acquired in schools, they were indeed able to conquer their full-fledged civil rights in 1964 and 1965. It equally seems important to strongly underline that these conquests were in no way accomplished by politicians. They were

the brain children of civil rights leaders, hailing from all segments of the US civil society. But we all know now with hindsight, that all of them were well-educated.

The second example that could serve to illustrate the link between education, emancipation and nation-building, comes from our own continent, in the then racist Republic of South-Africa. On the 16th of June 1976, the apartheid regime of that country attempted to forcefully impose the use of Afrikaans, the language spoken by a portion of the white minority, in black schools, thereby restricting access to universal education to a large number of English-speaking blacks who were opposed to such an act of blatant discrimination within an already discriminatory socio-political and cultural system. A very strong popular resistance to that cynical stratagem brought no less than 20 000 young students and pupils on the street of the South West Township (SOWETO) of the city of Johannesburg on the dreadful fatal day already mentioned above. Firing real bullets, the police is reported to have killed between 120 and 700 pupils who were crusading for “complete access to quality education” for all South Africans, regardless of race, creed or colour. Here again, the SOWETO riots were the defining factor and moment that would finally lead to the advent of full

democracy in the “Rainbow Nation”, only eighteen years later, in 1994. Why? Because the students of SOWETO who were only aged 10 at the time of the riots, were 28 when South Africa succeeded to achieve its dream of full universal voting rights for all its citizens, in April 1994. The type of population was in a position to achieve such an outcome, was as an organized group, that had been gradually better educated and, as such, could fight for their own rights.

Another indicator could be used to assess the importance of school in the emancipation process of a people: the educational and professional backgrounds of those who led the colonized territories of Africa towards independence and early nation building in the 1960’s and 1970’s: most of them belonged to the teaching profession.

### **AN EXAMINATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND OF MOST FATHER OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE: THE CLEAR PREDOMINANCE OF SCHOOL TEACHERS**

When one takes the trouble to quickly investigate the educational and early professional profile of many of the very African leaders who led their peoples to indepen-

dence, one is surely stuck by one undeniable fact: An impressive majority of them were school teachers. A few were trade unionists or full-fledged politicians.

Four examples will suffice to illustrate this assertion:

- Julius K. NYERERE (1922-1999), the former President of Tanzania was also very widely known as “Mwalimu” which in Swahili, means “Teacher”. He had been a devoted high school teacher for a long time before entering politics.

- Milton OBOTE (1924-2005), the former Head of State of Uganda also used the chalk as a secondary school teacher prior to becoming President of his country twice (1962-1971 and 1979-1985).

- Dr. KWAME NKRUMAH, (1909-1972) The Pan-Africanist President of Ghana, had acquired all the qualifications to become a University don before being absorbed by politics.

- Closer to us, John NGU FONCHA (1916-1999): the former Prime Minister and Vice-President of Cameroon, is remembered by so many of his compatriots for having taught for a long time in Bamenda schools in the 1930’s.

- Salomon TANDENG MUNA (1912-2002), former Prime Minister and Speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon. Prior to entering the field of politics, he assumed the responsibility of Head

of several Primary schools between 1932 and 1947, before becoming Head Tutor of Batibo Teachers Training College between 1947 and 1951.

The common link in the lives of all these illustrious African personalities is that they were first illuminated by the light of knowledge brought to them by their traditional and modern schooling, before illuminating the path of the many succeeding generations that had been placed under their responsibility. Indeed, the uplifting socio-economic role of school could not have been more evident than in the light of their individual and collective subsequent careers.

An argument which is often heard from those who support the “school boycott approach” is that “there is no need for children to go to school since schooling in this system offers no guarantee for a stable and bright future”. This academic system, according to them, offers no access to employment.

Though the overall assessment of “poor quality education” is by and large accurate – an issue which I have alluded to in many of my publications – depriving students and pupils from school will lead to producing an illiterate, dangerous, violent and disgruntled future society.

The “school boycott approach”, such a reasoning is all the more

surprising that a sizable majority of the current Anglophones leaders, including the most critical of its current functioning, went through this educational system. The training they received in this “mediocre” system allowed them to succeed in life in Cameroon and even more so abroad. What follows from all of the above, is the certainty that democracy allows all citizens to choose the path they deem best for themselves, so as to achieve the goals which they hold dear to their own hearts. It is of extreme importance however, to realize that a problem which has been lingering for the past 40 years cannot be resolved in the space of only one year.

#### **THE NECESSITY FOR CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE: IN SEARCH OF BRIDGE-BUILDERS AND BRIDGES IN THE CURRENT CAMEROONIAN LANDSCAPE**

When “the Anglophone crisis” erupted, one observation became surprisingly glaring. The absence of a sizable number of devoted and enthusiastic grassroots groups of people, willing to defend the cause of peaceful coexistence in both cultural entities. Neither the Francophones nor the Anglophones took it upon themselves, as organised civil society groups, to

consolidate national unity.

This is hardly surprising. Not much in our school curricula teach English-speaking pupils and students anything of deep value on French-speaking Cameroon and vice-versa. As a consequence, the two communities have grown apart culturally and continue to do so even when living in close physical proximity. In truth, most Francophones do not know much about Anglophones and the reverse is unfortunately absolutely true. Hence, the big boulevard for misunderstandings, rumour-mongering, and the flourishing of mutual negative prejudices.

Crises should be perceived as momentous times for creating a new political order accountable to the real needs of the people. The time for dialogue is now. Who should be the actors in these necessary dynamics of bridge-building? The communities that can understand and fit into both cultural backgrounds (through marriage, educational training, peace building, etc.).

But dialogue is more effective when conducted amongst two rational sides, ready to discuss in a peaceful and open manner. Fruitful dialogue also requires at least two major ingredients: humility from

all actors and trustworthiness as a general principle. It is to be feared that none of the above is for the moment is clearly detectable in the current context. It appears as though the process leading to peaceful dialogue has been hijacked by hard-headed people on both sides of the debate. All parties concerned should stand away from their certainties and engage in a genuine listening process aimed at really understanding each other's viewpoint. Once this is done, real dialogue can take place.

In conclusion, it seems important to highlight at least one major point in the midst of many others: refraining from going to school or from sending one's children to school cannot be considered as a rational solution for a people whose legitimate ambition is to transform their societies into communities whose members are fully equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st Century in the context of a knowledge-based economy.

In this light, more than ever before, there is a strong need for our educational system to train pupils and students able to become productive, self-reliant, efficient and proud citizens who know their country and their continent. Failure to do so could lead to disastrous

consequences.

The current crisis is not only an Anglophone problem. It is the concern of all Cameroonians of good faith. For when violence persists in a given society, you can rest assured that it is a manifestation of an unresolved conflict.



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