

Money, Power, and Electoral Competition: An Analysis of Campaign Financing in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Political parties play a significant and indispensable role in democratic systems by facilitating political competition, representation, and governance. However, the mechanisms that sustain their activities, particularly election campaign financing, remain insufficiently scrutinized in many developing democracies. This study examines election campaign financing in Cameroon, with a specific focus on the 2018 Presidential election, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the existing legal and institutional framework and assessing its implications for transparency and accountability. The study adopts a mixed research approach, employing questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions as primary data collection tools. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 and Microsoft Excel, and the results were presented using tables, graphs, and percentages. The analysis evaluates the effectiveness of the legal framework governing campaign financing, focusing on its ability to regulate funding sources and ensure fair electoral competition. Findings reveal that election campaign financing in Cameroon is derived from multiple sources, including private donations, public subsidies, and, in some cases, potentially illicit financial flows. Despite the existence of legal provisions requiring disclosure, the study identifies significant challenges, particularly weak enforcement mechanisms and limited transparency. These weaknesses create opportunities for corruption, distort electoral competitiveness, and contribute to an uneven political playing field that disproportionately favors incumbents and financially dominant parties. The study concludes that the current campaign finance regulatory framework is inadequate to ensure accountability and democratic integrity. It recommends strengthening transparency measures, enhancing enforcement mechanisms, and establishing independent oversight systems to improve the credibility of elections and promote sustainable democratic development in Cameroon.

Keywords: Election, Campaign, Financing, Presidential, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Unarguably, political parties have come to play significant and fundamental roles in most democracies. In spite of these fundamental roles, the activities and operations of political parties, and of course their significant roles are sometimes taken for granted. As political machines established to contest for, win elections, and wield governmental power, they are a critical link between the state and civil society, between the institutions of government and the groups and interests that operate within the society (Heywood, 2007). Although political parties often come under severe attacks by civil society for failing to substantially address society's variegated challenges, we can certainly not afford to lose sight of the roles they play in a political and democratic process.

Election campaign financing in Cameroon is characterized by widespread gift-giving and vote-buying practices. Candidates distribute food, money, and other resources to potential voters, turning campaigns into "refectory" atmospheres rather than ideological debates (Socpa, 2000; Hansen, 2010). These practices serve to demonstrate candidates' popularity and often mask electoral fraud (Socpa, 2000). The political elite, including long-standing government officials, mobilize significant resources during elections but typically disappear after voting concludes (Gwaibi, 2018). Social media has emerged as a new tool in Cameroonian elections, sometimes used to violate electoral laws by spreading campaign messages outside official periods and disseminating misinformation that can incite violence (Mekole, 2023). Despite these challenges, grassroots populations

occasionally see through politicians' tactics, potentially threatening the established political order (Gwaibi, 2018). Overall, Cameroonian election campaigns are marked by complex relationships between voters, party officials, and high-ranking political figures

Election campaign financing is a critical aspect of democratic processes in Africa, with various studies highlighting its impact on electoral outcomes (Oluwaseyi, 2016). In Cameroon, the financing of presidential elections has been a subject of concern, with allegations of corruption and abuse of state resources (Mbah, 2018). Research has shown that the lack of transparency in campaign financing can lead to undue influence by wealthy donors and undermine the integrity of elections (Mwenda, 2013). In Cameroon, the 2018 presidential election saw incumbent President Paul Biya face allegations of using state funds to finance his campaign.

The country's electoral laws require candidates to disclose their campaign finances, but enforcement is often lacking. This lack of transparency creates an environment conducive to corruption and abuse of power. Studies have also highlighted the role of foreign funding in African elections, including in Cameroon. The influence of foreign donors can compromise the sovereignty of African nations and undermine democratic processes (Mbaku, 2007).

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

The data used were obtained from both primary and secondary sources, with primary data obtained through pilot or exploratory survey, field observation, questionnaire administration, interviews and focus group discussions with party militants, electoral commission and local population. One set of questionnaires was used in this study. It was managed by the sampled population. This questionnaire was both unstructured and structured and was conducted face-to-face mostly in their homes and markets. Questionnaire administration usually requires a sampling technique that the researcher will use to administer this questionnaire.

Random sampling (which refers to a subset of individuals (sample) selected from a larger set (population) in which each individual is selected randomly and completely by chance such that each individual has an equal probability of being selected at any stage during the sampling process) was selected so that the sample population was identified using a percentage of the total population of the study area which is Cameroon. These questionnaires were distributed to different regions.

Interviews were also conducted to collect primary data. It is a technique that has been used to understand the underlying reasons and motivations for people's attitudes, preferences, or behaviors. Personal interviews through direct contacts with the population and an interview guide were used. The interview guides were structured according to the research objectives. Interviews were conducted with some source persons which are as follows: The chairperson of major political parties' were interviewed to gather information on the financing of campaigns.

DISCUSSIONS

1. Sources of Funding in Election Campaign

Political parties and candidates should be partly financed through private means. Private sources of funding may be internal or external to the party

Traditional sources of financing

The main traditional sources of internal party financing are membership fees, income from property, revenue from party activities such as the sale of newspapers or other party publications, fundraising activities, party festivals and other social events, and occasional public collections (Figure 2). Political parties are private voluntary associations which should in principle be in control of their own financial affairs, although these may be subject to some degree of state regulation. Laws governing the internal resources of parties should avoid interfering unnecessarily with the independence of political parties. As a rule, public laws should be, and in practice have been, framed fairly liberally, prohibiting or restricting only those forms of fundraising which have no real connection with a party's *raison d'être*. Commercial activities, such as the ownership or the acquisition

of shareholdings in commercial companies are one such example, and are often strictly limited if not prohibited on these grounds. According to Section 285 of the electoral code (Law No. 2012), Public funds earmarked for the funding of election campaigns for the election of Members of Parliament, Senators, regional or municipal councilors is divided into 2 (two) equal parts among the political parties taking part in the elections. The first part is paid after publication of the lists of candidates to all parties depending on the lists submitted and endorsed in the various constituencies. The second parts are paid after the proclamation of results to parties proportionately to the number of seats obtained. In the same light Funds earmarked for the funding of election campaign for presidential election, is divided in 2 (two) equal parts to candidates according to section 286 of the electoral code .The first part, after publication of the list of candidates which is allotted equally to the various candidates and the second, served after proclamation of results to candidates with more than 5% of votes cast, proportionately to the results obtained. It further state that any candidate who withdraws before the polls or who does not participate effectively in the election campaign is expected to refund the totality of the amount received in respect of the first part referred.

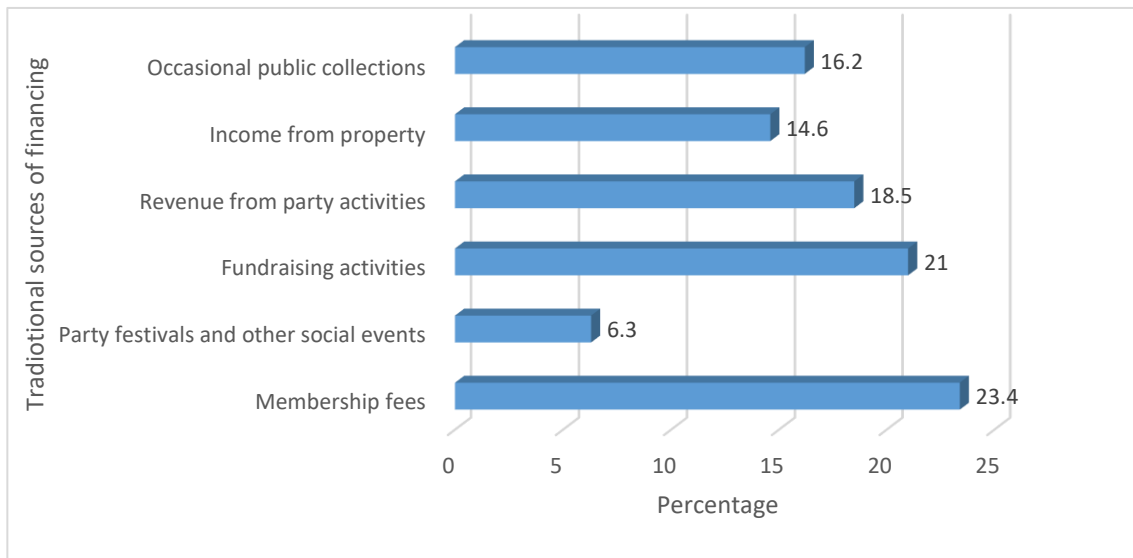


Figure 2: Traditional Sources of Election Campaign financing (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

According to respondents, Figure 2 indicate the traditional sources of electoral campaign financing in Cameroon with membership fee (23.4%) was the highest source of financing largely because all members of the political parties are usually compelled to pay a membership fee which is used for the running of the party and also includes financing their campaigns during election. Party festivals and other social events (6.3%) was the least source because festivals are mostly for enjoying and merry making and not for raising funds for the campaigns.

The traditional sources of internal party financing, and the regular membership or affiliation fees in particular, can generally be regarded as the most democratic and legitimate form of party financing. Membership contributions are an attractive form of party finance because they are donated on a voluntary basis and, notwithstanding material incentives which may underlie an individual’s motivation to join a party or clientelist services which are offered to party membership, they do not imply a direct pay-for-service relationship. Classical forms of party-owned businesses in particular are the sales of party literature and newspapers and the ownership of publishing companies affiliated to the party. Parties may also run their own recreation facilities, provide social security services, own travel agencies, sports teams, banks and housing projects. Some scholars have proposed public financing of political campaigns as a way to level the playing field and reduce the influence of private money in politics (Overton, 2004; Ackerman & Ayres, 2002). Proponents argue that public financing can increase political participation and reduce the potential for corruption, while opponents argue that it can stifle free speech and political competition.

External sources of financing

External sources of financing for electoral campaigns refer to funds obtained from outside the candidate or political party itself. These funds are crucial for covering campaign expenses such as advertising, rallies, staff

salaries, and other campaign-related activities. The nature and extent of external financing vary widely across different countries and political systems. While some countries heavily regulate campaign finance to ensure fairness and transparency, others have looser restrictions.

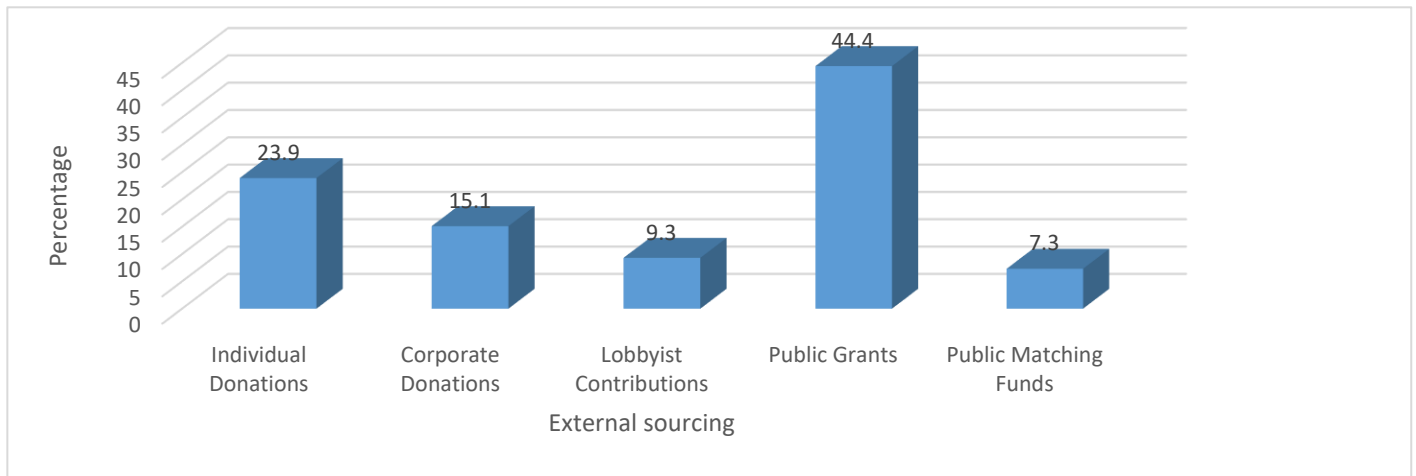


Figure 3: External Sources of Election Campaign financing (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

The figure shows the external sources of election campaign financing in Cameroon. Public Grants are the highest source of funding at 44.4% which involves direct government funding allocated to political parties or candidates based on specific criteria. While Public Matching Funds are the lowest at 7.3% as government matching funds for small individual donations, designed to encourage grassroots participation.

The legal framework of party financing should specifically limit, prohibit or otherwise regulate contributions from foreign donors. The secret funding of politicians and parties by foreign governments has a long history. The example of the Soviet Union financing communist parties abroad is particularly well known. Not only foreign governments, however, but also foreign intelligences agencies have engaged in covert funding activities. During the Cold War, for example, the CIA was actively involved in funding anti-communist political organizations. While these practices have recently largely lost their relevance, a more common practice today consists of foreign funding of political parties through political foundations and research institutes. These often receive government subsidies to provide financial support to politicians and parties in countries where democratic institutions are still in their infancy. These funds are usually less secretive and are channeled in such a way as to ensure the neutrality of the donor governments. When it comes to foreign money funding politicians and parties, a distinction should thus be made between secret and clandestine activities with a political purpose, on the one hand, and legal activities often explicitly targeted at democracy building.

A significant body of research has examined the relationship between campaign funding and political influence. Studies have found that political donations and spending can influence policy outcomes, with donors often receiving favorable treatment from elected officials (Ansolabehere et al., 2003; Stratmann, 2005). This raises concerns about the potential for wealthy individuals and special interests to exert disproportionate influence over the political process.

In response to these concerns, many countries have implemented campaign finance regulations, such as limits on donations, restrictions on the use of corporate and union funds, and requirements for transparency in political spending (Primo & Snyder, 2010; Cagé, 2020). The effectiveness of these regulations remains contested, with some studies suggesting that they may be limited in impact or even counterproductive (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2000; Gordon & Hafer, 2005).

The paper found out that there are various sources of funding campaigns in Cameroon among which include state funding: The government allocates funds to political parties from its budget, but the amount is often inadequate and subject to political manipulation. Each political party represented in the National Assembly receives public funding based on its performance in previous elections. For instance, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) receives substantial state support, which assists in its campaigning efforts

during elections. Each political party received a sum of CFA 30,000,000 for their campaigns, disbursed in two halves. A sum of CFA 15,000,000 is granted at the onset of their campaigns, with the balance provided upon proof that there was evidence of some presidential campaign activity. The SDF as the main opposition party complained that the allocation was not sufficient to run an effective campaign

Also, Private Donations Campaigns are frequently funded by private donations from individuals and businesses, which raise concerns about transparency and the potential for corruption. Individuals like Maurice Kamto, leader of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM), have been observed investing substantial personal resources into their campaigns to secure visibility and influence. Members of the CPDM and other opposition parties are typically required to pay membership fees or dues, which contribute to the party's general finances. This system helps create a base of financial support from its large membership this help fund party activities and campaigns. This grassroots support can be a crucial source of income.

Self-financing by Candidates is another source of election campaign financing. Many candidates use their personal wealth to fund their campaigns, particularly in a context where access to public funding is limited. Political parties sometimes create donor networks composed of influential members who contribute financially. For example, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) has relied historically on both internal and external networks to raise funds for its campaigns.

Beyond the distribution of funding sources, the findings reveal notable disparities in access to financial resources among political actors. Incumbent parties, particularly those with access to state resources, demonstrate a clear advantage in mobilizing funds compared to opposition parties and independent candidates. This imbalance is further reinforced by the reliance on public grants and established donor networks, which tend to favor dominant political parties. As a result, electoral competition is not solely determined by policy platforms or voter appeal but is significantly influenced by financial capacity. The data also suggest that campaign strategies are increasingly shaped by the availability of resources, with well-funded actors able to invest more in outreach, media visibility, and voter mobilization. Consequently, these dynamics contribute to an uneven playing field, potentially undermining the fairness and competitiveness of the electoral process in Cameroon.

2. Challenges of Election Campaign Financing in Cameroon

Election campaign financing in Cameroon faces several significant challenges such as lack of transparency and accountability, unequal playing field, political patronage and corruption, limited public awareness and participation and legal framework and regulatory challenges (figure 4), impacting the integrity and fairness of the electoral process.

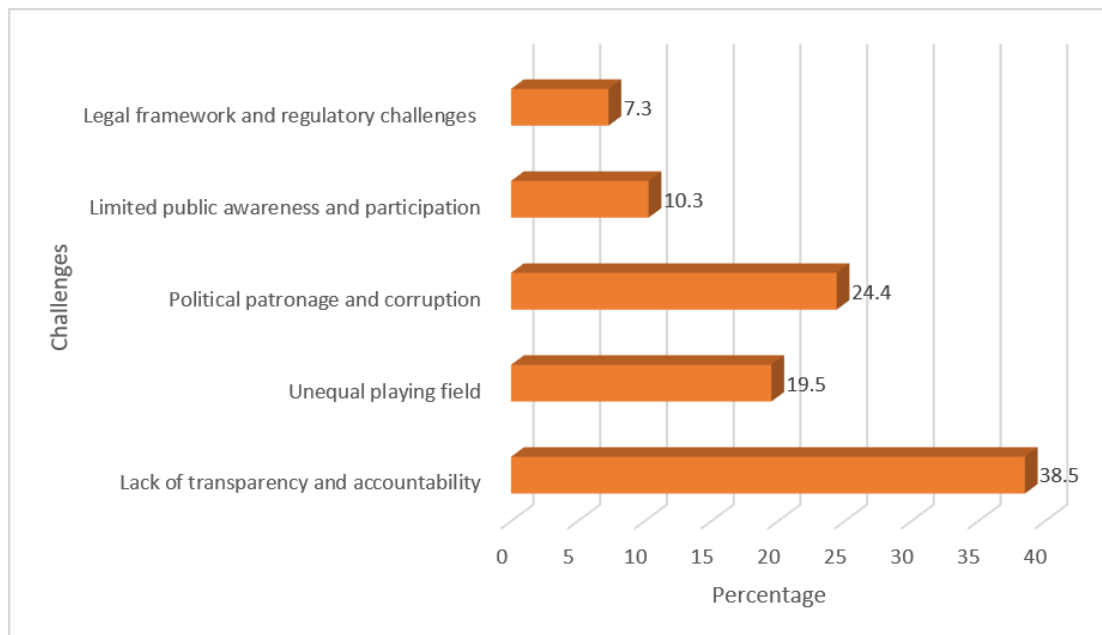


Figure 4: Challenges of Election Campaign Financing in Cameroon (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Figure 4 shows the challenges of election campaign financing in Cameroon, as perceived by respondents. The most significant challenge identified is the lack of transparency and accountability, with 38.5% of respondents citing it as a major concern. This is followed by unequal playing field (19.5%), political patronage and corruption (24.4%), limited public awareness and participation (10.3%), and legal framework and regulatory challenges (7.3%).

The data suggests that there are significant concerns about the fairness and transparency of election campaign financing in Cameroon. The high percentage of respondents who identified lack of transparency and accountability as a major challenge suggests that there is a need for greater oversight and regulation of campaign finance. The other challenges identified, such as unequal playing field, political patronage and corruption, also point to the need for reforms to ensure that elections are fair and democratic.

Lack of effective oversight: Mbaku (2007: 4) critically attributes the persistence of political corruption in Africa to the structural weaknesses embedded within post-independence institutional frameworks, arguing that these arrangements were neither designed to safeguard public interest nor to impose meaningful constraints on political elites. Rather than functioning as instruments of accountability, state institutions in many African contexts have been co-opted and repurposed to facilitate elite accumulation and reinforce political dominance.

Consequently, anti-corruption efforts have remained largely ineffective, not simply due to capacity limitations but because of the absence of autonomous and empowered oversight mechanisms capable of enforcing accountability. This institutional fragility sustains a culture of impunity, where violations go unpunished and reform efforts are systematically undermined (Dodoo, 2025).

Furthermore, the entrenchment of patronage politics exacerbates these governance deficiencies. As Amundsen (2006: 4) argues, political corruption is not incidental but deeply embedded in systems of power preservation, where the allocation of financial and material resources is strategically deployed to maintain political loyalty and sustain elite control. In this context, practices such as favoritism, clientelism, and politically motivated resource distribution are not merely byproducts of weak governance but constitute deliberate strategies that distort institutional integrity and undermine democratic accountability.

Lack of transparency and accountability shows that the origin of campaign funds often remains shrouded in secrecy, making it difficult to track the flow of money and identify potential sources of undue influence. Current regulations require candidates to disclose their campaign expenditures, but the level of detail and verification mechanisms are inadequate. This lack of transparency allows for potential misuse of funds and makes it challenging to hold candidates accountable. Existing regulations lack robust enforcement mechanisms, making it difficult to punish violations and deter illicit campaign financing practices.

Incumbents often have access to and use public resources and the state machinery, giving them an unfair advantage in fundraising and campaign spending. Opposition parties and independent candidates often struggle to secure adequate funding, creating an uneven playing field and hindering their ability to compete effectively. While private sector contributions are allowed, the lack of clear regulations and oversight can lead to undue influence and corruption.

The use of campaign funds for patronage and clientelism is a widespread practice, undermining the principles of free and fair elections. Campaign financing can be used to bribe voters or influence electoral outcomes, compromising the integrity of the electoral process. The absence of a strong and independent electoral commission with sufficient resources and authority to oversee campaign financing further exacerbates these issues.

The existing legal framework governing campaign financing is outdated and inadequate to address the current challenges. The lack of comprehensive regulations covering areas such as campaign spending limits, donor disclosure requirements, and enforcement mechanisms creates loopholes for abuse.

Illicit financial flows are a significant concern in many African economies, which are largely cash-based and increasingly rely on (largely unregulated) mobile banking, complicating political finance oversight. In their quest for funding, political actors sometimes resort to complex and illicit methods of self-financing, including the trade

in illicit drugs, illegal mining of natural resources, poaching, and other forms of corruption. Political parties in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, and Tanzania have accepted such funds (Winer and Roule, 2003; Warf, 2017). The African Union (AU) Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption sought to address this challenge by establishing mechanisms to combat political corruption and to punish those convicted. Accordingly, some member states, including Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa, have adopted relevant policy instruments.

CONCLUSION

The Cameroonian electoral system, like many others across Africa, reflects the complex and often opaque nature of election campaign financing. Although a legal framework exists to regulate campaign spending, its weak implementation has created opportunities for illicit practices, thereby undermining the integrity of the electoral process. The persistent lack of transparency in campaign financing continues to erode public trust and reinforce perceptions of corruption, ultimately impeding democratic development. Moreover, the dominance of wealthy individuals and well-resourced political parties has resulted in an uneven playing field, limiting the participation and competitiveness of marginalized groups and independent candidates.

Amadu and Ibrahim (2025) note that “a robust and enforceable campaign finance regime is a cornerstone of democratic integrity and the fight against political corruption.” Cameroon must therefore prioritize strengthening its campaign finance regulatory framework. This includes enhancing transparency through comprehensive disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures, establishing effective enforcement mechanisms through an independent regulatory authority, and promoting public awareness to encourage citizen participation in accountability processes. Although both the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) and the Social Democratic Front (SDF) rely on similar funding mechanisms, such as membership dues and fundraising activities, significant disparities in financial resources and access to state funding persist. The ruling CPDM, in particular, benefits from structural advantages that shape electoral dynamics and reinforce its dominance within the political landscape.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. First, robust disclosure requirements must be implemented to ensure full transparency in campaign funding, supported by the establishment of an independent regulatory body tasked with monitoring compliance and enforcing existing laws. Measures should also be introduced to reduce the advantages enjoyed by incumbent parties, including expanding public funding to opposition parties and independent candidates while regulating private sector contributions to prevent undue influence. In addition, stricter penalties must be enforced for violations of campaign finance regulations, alongside initiatives aimed at promoting ethical conduct among political actors.

Enhancing public participation is equally essential. Encouraging citizen engagement in monitoring campaign financing, strengthening the role of civil society organizations as watchdogs, and promoting public education on electoral processes will help foster accountability and transparency. Finally, there is a pressing need to overhaul existing legal frameworks to address current gaps and align them with international best practices in campaign finance regulation.

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