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The Social Demands Behind the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis of 2016 and the Government's Response: Exploring the Origins of Post-colonial Conflicts in Africa

Lotsmart Fonjong* & Joseph Takougang**

Abstract

In 2016, some Anglophone civil society organisations and university students in Cameroon began to protest peacefully against the dominance of the French language and the Francophone system in English schools and courts. The protest was the culmination of over fifty years of frustration among those who accused the Francophone-dominated government of undermining Anglophone identity in a bicultural country that had, at independence, been a union between former British Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon. This paper posits that the Anglophone conflict is rooted both in the legacy of European colonisation in Africa and the flawed policies of the Ahidjo and Biya regimes. Both regimes manifested apparent blindness to the cherished colonial identity of Anglophones and violated protective provisions of the Federal Constitution that established the union. Although colonialism created an Anglophone minority, successive Francophone-led administrations neglected Cameroon's biculturalism and bijuralism, leading to Anglophone marginalisation, disillusion, and protests. Current government attempts to resolve the conflict are flawed because they do not address the root structural causes of the conflict.

Keywords: Colonialism, language, marginalisation, secession, protest, armed conflict, Cameroon

* Professor and Consultant, Department of Africana Studies, University of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. Email: fonjonln@ucmail.uc.edu

** Professor and Head of the Department of Africana Studies, University of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. Email: takougj@ucmail.uc.edu

Résumé

En 2016, des organisations de la société civile et des étudiants anglophones du Cameroun ont commencé à manifester pacifiquement contre la prédominance de la langue française et du système francophone dans les écoles et les tribunaux anglais. Cette manifestation marquait l'aboutissement de plus de cinquante ans de frustration de ceux qui accusent le gouvernement, dominé par les francophones, de saper l'identité anglophone dans un pays biculturel qui, à l'indépendance, était une union entre l'ancien Cameroun méridional britannique et la République du Cameroun. Cet article postule que le conflit anglophone trouve ses racines à la fois dans l'héritage de la colonisation européenne en Afrique et dans les politiques défaillantes des régimes Ahidjo et Biya. Ces deux régimes ont fait preuve d'un aveuglement manifeste à l'identité coloniale chère aux anglophones et ont violé les dispositions de la Constitution fédérale qui a instauré l'Union. Une minorité anglophone est le résultat du colonialisme, mais les administrations francophones successives ont négligé le biculturalisme et le bijuridisme du Cameroun, entraînant marginalisation, désillusion et protestations des anglophones. Les tentatives actuelles du gouvernement de résoudre le conflit sont défaillantes, car elles ne s'attaquent pas aux causes structurelles profondes du conflit.

Mots-clés : Colonialisme ; langue ; marginalisation ; sécession ; manifestations ; conflit armé ; Cameroun.

Introduction and Context

Several global and continental attempts including poverty alleviation programmes from Africa's Western partners and the continent's 'silencing of the gun' initiatives, have been pursued as ways of dealing with incessant conflicts in Africa. However, the results have been dismal. The numbers of conflicts across the continent is growing. This is partly because some of the programmes to silence the guns on the continent are both shallow and ill-conceived, focusing on the symptoms of a problem largely rooted in Africa's colonial past. Whether in Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Cameroon, sustainable peace will require national and continental leaders to confront some of the ugly historical facts with honesty and seriousness, and to carry out the potentially painful redress measures that are required for true healing to follow.

The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon is an example of an African conflict whose origin and solutions must come from historical analysis of the root causes. Unfortunately, this reality has been sidelined by national authorities who misconstrue the origin of the conflict as a social matter, and

prefer to adopt a social focus on 'convenience' measures that have proven their inadequacies over the years. In so doing, successive administrations have squandered numerous opportunities to address structural deficiencies created by the post-World War II international relations environment, which resulted in the establishment of Cameroon with a federal structure of government that was never given enough time to be tested.

Key causes of the conflict are the greed and arrogance of some Francophone leaders who, for the longest time, underestimated the drive and resolve of their oppressed Anglophone brothers to stand up against injustice. On 12 October 2016, a peaceful protest by lawyers, teachers and university students in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, challenging the use of the French language and system in Anglophone schools and courts soon spiralled into uncontrollable violence that has plagued the country and derailed development in both French- and English-speaking parts of the country for about seven years. At the time of writing, no resolution was yet in sight.

The 2016 protest was the culmination of more than five decades of frustration felt by many Anglophone Cameroonians who accused the nation's two post-colonial presidents, Ahmadou Ahidjo (1959 to 1982) and Paul Biya (1982 to the present time), of well-orchestrated policies that had led to the marginalisation of the minority Anglophone Cameroonians, economic deprivation in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and the devaluation of Anglophone identity (Campbell 2018; Eyoh 1998; Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997, 2004, Konings and Nyamnjoh 2000). By early 2017, what started as a call for socio-political reforms had evolved into demands for secession and the establishment of an independent 'Ambazonia republic' among some Anglophone Cameroonians (O'Grady and Lee 2019). The evolution of the peaceful protest into armed conflict has resulted in the displacement and deaths of thousands of Cameroonians at the hands of government security forces, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) or Ambazonia fighters, also known as Amba boys,[1] and rogue elements who have taken advantage of the resulting chaos and lawlessness to extract revenge for personal grievances. Not only has this rendered life and movements within the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon challenging and dangerous because of the activities and harassment from government security forces, Ambazonia armed groups or rogue elements (Amin 2018; Bone 2021), it has also devastated the local economy.

The above narrative is indicative of how most African governments have failed to quickly and effectively address issues that have an impact on a critical group or sector of its population, which could destroy the

political and socio-economic fabric of a nation. While a lot of the recent scholarship on the Anglophone conflict has focused on the human cost and other tragedies of the conflict (Amin 2021; Willis et al. 2019; Pommerolle and De Marie Heungoup 2017; Bang and Balgah 2022), this paper emphasises its historical origins and the Biya regime's inability to resolve the crisis. It argues that: (1) the genesis of the crisis can be traced to Cameroon's colonial history and the errors and ambiguities of the 1961 Federal Constitution that was intended to create a union of the former German Kamerun and undertake a unique experiment in nation-building in post-colonial Africa (Kofele-Kale 1980); and (2) the escalation of the conflict is the result of a leadership that has abdicated responsibility for dealing with the real problems.

To make the discussion systematic, the paper is divided into four sections. The first section uses examples from other African countries to frame the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon in a broader context of ethnicity, dismemberment, suffocation, and other challenges that Africans inherited from colonisation. It is followed by a brief narrative of the colonial history of Cameroon, which started as a union of the former British Southern Cameroons and the French Republic of Cameroun under a Federal Constitution. This is the root of the problem. Section three examines how both Ahidjo and his successor Biya exploited the vagueness of the Cameroon Federal Constitution to dismantle the architecture of what was supposed to be a union of equal partners, creating conditions for Anglophone marginalisation and the resulting grievances and disenchantment. We examine in the final section how this disillusion escalated into violence in 2016, and some of the dismal government responses to the conflict.

Methodology

This study deals with both historical and current issues and involves multiple actors and stakeholders operating from within the Anglophone regions, in Cameroon as a whole, and from the Cameroonian diaspora. To address this complexity, and to avoid bias and other shortcomings, we opted for triangulation, which allow us to use a combination of research methods to gather information. Several historical works, especially those of Albert Mukong and Piet Konings, who have written extensively on the 'Anglophone problem', were reviewed. These and other works of scholarship on European colonisation in Africa allowed us to appreciate the historical context of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon alongside other, similar, experiences on the continent.

This was followed by a review of local newspapers, and other academic and grey literature to understand the failure of the Cameroon federation and the widening of Anglophone dissatisfaction. This information provided the framework to extensively interrogate news reports from traditional, local, international (audio, visual and print) and social media, following the October 2016 outbreak of the crisis and its evolution into a civil conflict. Information gathered from both traditional and social media has been instrumental in analysing the Cameroon government's response to the crisis and reactions from Anglophone activists and NSAGs.

Finally, in-depth phone interviews with some self-exiled Anglophone lawyers who were present at the beginning of the 2016 demonstration, as well as other self-proclaimed leaders in the diaspora who had been identified from our preliminary analysis. The objective of these interviews was to corroborate or refute information and perceptions of Anglophone reactions to the Cameroon government's efforts to defuse the crisis, gathered from traditional and social media. We have been able to discuss the results from these interviews alongside the Cameroon government's policies and institutional responses to explain what is missing in government efforts to address the Anglophone problems and meet the aspirations of most Anglophones.

The Legacy of European Colonialism in Africa

African states are largely a product of European colonialisation when, following the 1884 Berlin Conference, European powers partitioned Africa and divided it among themselves, creating colonies that had little regard to kinship, ethnicity, or other sociological or anthropological considerations. This meant that specific ethnic and cultural identities of Africans were sacrificed for European economic and political interests. This situation was further complicated at the end of World War I, when the German colonies were divided among the Allied powers. German-ceded territories like Cameroon became known as League of Nations-mandated territories after World War I and as United Nations trust territories after World War II.

At the end of nearly a century of colonial rule, African states emerged, weakened by ethnic fragmentation and tensions, divided by many different local languages, and further segmented by the influence of foreign religions – Islam and Christianity. Although national unity was the political slogan of almost every post-colonial administration, the quest for ethnic identity has prevailed as one of the forces fuelling civil conflicts in post-independence Africa. To put it differently, civil conflicts in Africa are part of the legacies of the Berlin Conference and European colonialisation of the continent. Ethnic identity politics manifesting as civil conflicts in Africa are proof

of the extent of the damage caused by the Berlin Conference and the shortsightedness of post-independent African countries wanting to maintain boundaries imposed by the colonialists. The Berlin Conference created African states with ethnic minorities and majorities within their borders which, in addition to several other ethnic differences, were important sources of ongoing conflict (Bates 1990).

The analysis by Englebert et al. (2002) of how groups that existed before the colonial era were partitioned ('dismembered') and forced to live together with other groups of distinct political cultures to form a state ('suffocated') shows how this set of circumstances can only increase the likelihood of civil wars, secession struggles, and political instability, as can be seen in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon.

As Boyd (1979) has noted, post-colonial African states inherited artificial boundaries that grouped different ethnicities in one state, making those states susceptible to socio-economic and political instability. These boundaries, according to Ajala (1983), are the origin of multiple conflicts. States without nations were created from the European partition of Africa as has been admitted by some African statespersons like the veteran Nigerian politician, Obafemi Awolowo who contended in 1947 that Nigeria was 'a mere geographic expression' and not a nation (Young 1999) because colonial-inherited arbitrary boundaries neglect ethnic and cultural identities, and in some cases, even kinship ties. Maiese (2003) believes that self-esteem and [ethnic] identity are not only intricately linked to each other, but they also establish how one views the world. Any threat to this identity is likely to produce a strong, aggressive, or defensive response, leading to conflict. When groups believe that 'their sense of self-esteem is threatened, or denied legitimacy and respect', this creates conflict. This can become ugly when identity conflicts are linked to national sentiments that could create a national superiority complex and eventual domination by one group over other groups, as has been seen in civil conflicts throughout Africa.

The decision by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to advocate for maintaining the artificial colonial boundaries of the continent unchanged has been costly in countries such as Cameroon, Rwanda, Sudan, and Nigeria. The Nigerian civil war of 1967 is an example of a nationalistic resistance to the ethnic secession declaration of the Republic of Biafra by the Igbo ethnic group of the Southwest who did not have a sense of national belonging and security in the Federation of Nigeria (Norwich University n.d.). Scholars, including Boyd (1979) and Paine (2019), posit that Africa would have experienced fewer conflicts if the colonialists had allowed African states to evolve organically with boundaries that recognised ethnic contours.

Blanton et al. (2001) support this argument, submitting that not only did the system of colonial rule create fertile grounds for competition and conflict in post-colonial Africa, but that conflict is one of the legacies of the system of indirect rule implemented in British colonies. The British colonial policy of 'divide and rule' created administrative units along ethnic lines and laid the foundation for many post-independence conflicts as seen in the deadly 2007–2008 post-electoral violence in Kenya that claimed about 1,300 lives and displaced 350,000 people (Mwaura 2010). The fact is that ethnic competition sometimes produced leaders who are ready to exclude people from other ethnic groups to protect their power (Paine 2019). This may work only for a short period because politically excluded groups are more likely to fight back against political marginalisation, giving rise to instability (Wucherpfennig et al. 2016), as seen in cases such as Cameroon or apartheid-era South Africa.

From the foregoing, we argue in this paper that the ethnicisation of political power (Paine 2019) creates a dilemma for the dominant group about whether to advocate for ethnic inclusion or exclusion to protect power in post-independence Cameroon. Excluding other ethnic groups completely may risk disenchantment and rebellion from those excluded, and this may bring about the overthrow of the ruling group by the excluded group. Including other ethnic groups may work well for a while, but it may also create conditions where the dominant group's hold on power is lost to people from other groups who have been included in the power structure.

Although Anglophones in Cameroon do not constitute an ethnic group, they form a minority with a distinct cultural identity that differs from that of the Francophone majority. Paine's (2019) words about the dilemma of whether it is better for the dominant group to include others or exclude them are relevant here. While a small group of Anglophones have been coopted into power, the Francophone-dominated government is 'unwilling' to allow them to lead powerful ministries like defence, the interior, finance, or foreign affairs, from where it is feared they could 'overthrow' the regime from within. Many Anglophones who have been excluded from political and economic power are asserting their identity and rights as Cameroonians through protests. The lack of immediate answers from the government serves to fuel the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. This has led to the call by some Anglophones for secession – the establishment of a separate state for people with their specific colonial cultural identity. This is in accordance with the belief of Sambanis (2001) that the solution to ethnic conflicts in Africa is the physical separation of warring parties along ethnic lines.

Anglophone Conflict and Identity Struggles in Africa

Anglophones, particularly activists, draw a parallel between the current conflict in Cameroon and other similar situations on the African continent. For example, they cite the case of how the failure of the apartheid state in South Africa to establish a fair and equitable non-racial society contributed to decades of violence that ultimately led to the collapse of white minority rule in 1994. A similar argument pertains to the failure of the dominant Americo-Liberian ruling elite to include Indigenous people in the government. Failure to address many of the concerns of Indigenous people brought about the rise to power of Sergeant Samuel Doe, the first Indigenous President of Liberia. Doe's ruthless rule ultimately led to the first Liberian civil war (1989–1997) and the deaths of thousands (Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar 1995; Hogan 2021). Anglophones also point to the situation in the former Sudan where decades of struggle by southern Sudan against exploitation and domination by the predominantly Muslim government in the north (Deng 2005) culminated in the independence of South Sudan in 2011.

Other examples that can be traced back to the European colonisation of Africa include the Eritrean Liberation Front's struggle against Ethiopia (1961–1991), the Lord's Resistance Army war against the Ugandan government (1987), the civil war in Somalia (1991), the Rwanda genocide (1994), and the establishment of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

The birth of the Cameroon nation as the root the Anglophone conflict

The defeat of Germany during World War I brought an end to that country's occupation of Kamerun. The territory was shared between France and Britain. France received four-fifths of the territory (French Cameroun), and Britain the balance in the form of Southern British Cameroons and Northern British Cameroons along the western border with Nigeria. Although these territories were administered under League of Nations mandates and later as United Nations trust territories for nearly four decades, France administered French Cameroun under a highly centralised structure as it did in its other colonies on the continent. By contrast, Britain administered its portion as an integral part of its Nigeria colony, a system that continued until 1954, when Southern Cameroons was recognised as a separate entity within Nigeria (Rubin 1971: 80). France ultimately granted the former UN trusteeship independence on 1 January 1960 as the Republic of Cameroon. However, when it granted

Cameroon independence, France supported Ahmadou Ahidjo, leader of the Union Camerounaise, because he was seen as malleable and likely to protect France's interests (Johnson 2015; Rubin 1971).

Unlike in the former French trust territory, where the challenge at independence was more about the nature of post-independence Franco-Cameroon relations, citizens in the British Southern Cameroons, like their counterparts in the British Northern Cameroons, were not granted the option of self-determination and independence. In fact, despite petitions and visits from representatives of British Southern Cameroons to London and the United Nations demanding independence, both the United Nations and the British Colonial Office objected to the request on the basis that an independent Southern Cameroons could not be a viable economic entity since Britain was reluctant to provide continued financial support after independence (Phillipson 1959; l 2019). Moreover, during the mandate, Britain believed that both the Northern and Southern British Cameroons should move toward eventual integration with Nigeria (Le Vine 1964: 200). In a UN-organised plebiscite held on 11 February 1961, British Southern Cameroonians voted overwhelmingly (235,571 to 97,741) in favour of joining the Republic of Cameroon, while the British Northern Cameroons voted to join the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Stevenson 1964).

A Federal Constitution was later negotiated in July in the town of Foumban in the Republic of Cameroon to establish the relationship between the Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon. This constitution created two federal states of East and West Cameroon, replacing the former Republic of Cameroon and Southern Cameroons, respectively, represented on the national flag by two stars. Although the Federal Constitution granted the Francophone-controlled federal government and President broad powers and jurisdiction over all important state institutions, including defence, the economy, foreign policy, higher education, and the judiciary, each of the federated states operated its own legislative, executive and judicial institutions according to its respective colonial heritage. The Federal Constitution protected the rights of Anglophone minorities as evidenced in Article 47, which considered any proposed constitutional modifications that would touch on the federal nature of the state to be inadmissible.

Nevertheless, President Ahidjo (1959–1982) exploited the weaknesses in the federal Constitution to buttress his power by introducing policies that would gradually erode Anglophone socio-economic and political culture. Similarly, his successor, President Biya (1982–present) continued to undermine and marginalise Anglophones, culminating in the current

Anglophone conflict. We examine below some of the key decisions and policies that ultimately precipitated the crisis in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions.

Ahidjo ended the multiparty politics enjoyed in Anglophone West Cameroon by outlawing multipartyism and establishing the Cameroon National Union (CNU) as the only party in Cameroon in 1966. In 1972, Ahidjo abolished the federation in favour of a unitary state (United Republic of Cameroon) in gross violation of Part X Article 47:1 of the federal Constitution, which states that 'Any proposal for the revision of the present Constitution which impairs the unity and integrity of the federation shall be inadmissible'.

Bayart (1978: 89) posits that:

> The 1972 Unitary Constitution can therefore be seen as the logical crowning of the twin process of harmonizing the administration of the two federal states and the maximizing of presidential power. Western (West) Cameroon autonomy, especially in matters of legislation and political institutions, was now a dead letter, and the authority of the Head of State extended to every corner of the country.

Biya changed the name of the country in 1984 from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon and replaced the two stars on the flag that symbolised the two federated states with a single star. The change in name was seen as the proverbial slap in the face and the last step in the assimilation of Anglophone culture since the new name (Republic of Cameroon) harkened back to the name of the former French territory when it gained its independence on 1 January 1960.

Beyond the political machinations that effectively deprived the former British Southern Cameroons of its Anglophone institutions, both the Ahidjo and Biya administrations also instituted other policies that led to the demise of many West Cameroon economic institutions, including the collapse of the Cameroon Bank, West Cameroon Marketing Board, Tiko Airport and Victoria and Tiko Seaports. This made West Cameroon a less economically viable entity that was more dependent on the former French territory (Amin and Takougang 2018).

While these changes might have caused some opposition and resistance among the Anglophone population in the 1970s and 1980s (Mukong 1985; 1992; Pommerolle and De Marie Hungoup 2017), it was not until the early 1990s that resistance gathered steam with the establishment of the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF) during the pro-democracy movements that swept the country and Africa more generally (Krieger 1994, Takougang, 2019). The birth of the SDF in May 1990 and subsequent

political liberalisation created space for other movements and organisations, including the All Anglophone Movement (AAM), the Free West Cameroon Movement, the Southern Cameroons Restoration Movement, the Cameroon Anglophone Movement, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and the Southern Cameroons People's Conference (SCPC). These organisations promoted the Anglophone struggle, which ultimately crystallised the crisis that has plagued the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions since October 2016.

The 2016 Anglophone crisis

As noted above, Anglophones protesting injustices and oppressions in Cameroon is not new. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Anglophones resisted government attempts to privatise the giant Cameroon Development Corporation based in the region, and to harmonise the General Certificate of Education (GCE) exam with the Francophone examination system. They also fought to establish the Cameroon GCE Board and the first English university – the University of Buea. But rarely have any of their struggles involved arms and huge domestic and diaspora adherents, like what began in 2016.

On 12 October 2016, Anglophone reaction to the union and Francophone-led dominated government took an unimaginable turn. Anglophone lawyers and teachers rose against the devaluation of the English judicial and educational sub-systems in Cameroon through the 'Francophonization' of courts[2] and schools. They argued that the appointment of Francophones who barely spoke the English language to Anglophone courts and schools not only undermined the administration of justice in the courts, but was intended to destroy the Anglophone educational system, especially considering that bilingualism in Cameroon had become a farce. Indeed, to coordinate their efforts against the marginalisation of the Anglophones, the teachers and lawyers established the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) in 2016, commonly referred to as the Consortium. The Consortium's demands included an end to Anglophone marginalisation, the recognition and respect of the distinct bijural and bicultural nature of Cameroon's legal and education systems, and a return to the 1961 two-state federation.[3]

The Consortium and its leadership became the face of Anglophone resistance. It was led by Barrister Agbor Balla representing the lawyers, Dr Neba Fontem (Secretary-General) representing universities and other higher institutions, and Wilfred Tassang (Program Coordinator), from the secondary educational sector. This broad and inclusive leadership

enabled the Consortium to easily gain momentum, convince Anglophones to support its cause, and secure their support for strikes, lockdowns and school boycotts. These actions that were intended to pressure the Cameroon government into addressing the demands of the people of the Anglophone regions subsequently turned deadly.

It is estimated that, by 2020, 900,000 people in the Northwest and Southwest regions had been rendered homeless by the crisis, while another 60,000 had fled to neighbouring Nigeria. Over 600,000 children were unable to attend school on a regular basis during the same period (Craig 2020). In 2018, the conflict had led to 1.5 million people needing assistance (Lamarche and Fox 2021: 4). The threat from both the government forces and Ambazonia militias in the region increased. Travelling to the region became high risk for many Anglophones in the diaspora and those living in Francophone regions. Many activities, including wedding and funeral celebrations in the region often carried out by Anglophone Cameroonians in the diaspora, are increasingly becoming things of the past (Amin 2018).

Because of the human rights abuses and lack of security in Anglophone regions, there have been mixed reactions from Cameroon's international partners. In late October 2019, US President Donald Trump announced the exclusion of Cameroon from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). This Clinton-era policy was intended to increase Africa's economic engagement with the United States from 1 January 2020 (United States Department of State, 2019, Paquette, D., 2019). Cross-cultural academic exchange visits between some American and Cameroonian universities in the Anglophone regions were discontinued (Amin 2018). Meanwhile, on 15 April 2022, the administration of US President Joe Biden granted an 18-month temporary protected status (TPS) to more than 40,000 Cameroonians who were in the United States by 14 April 2022 because of the armed conflict and extreme violence in the Cameroon perpetrated by government forces, armed separatists, and Boko Haram (Sacchetti 2022).

The Cameroon Government's Failed Response to the Anglophone Conflict

Despite the human costs and other negative impacts of the Anglophone conflict on the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions (United States Department of State, 2022; HRW, 2022), the Cameroon government has been unable to take effective action to mitigate the crisis. In this section, we discuss how the government's failure to persuade Anglophone activists to discontinue their peaceful resistance led to numerous administrative blunders, which eventually transfromed the crisis into an armed conflict.

Some of these costly mistakes include outlawing the Consortium and arresting its leaders, shutting down the internet in the Anglophone regions, creating common law departments in Francophone universities, and the unilateral move to organise the Major National Dialogue without securing effective Anglophone participation.

The ban on the Consortium and the arrest of its leaders

Initially, rather than take Anglophone demands seriously, the government, as was customary, tried to ignore and downplay the seriousness of the Consortium's demands and its ability to mobilise the masses. It rejected the existence of 'an Anglophone problem', delegitimised the leaders of the Consortium, and used security forces to intimidate Anglophone groups who supported the course and activities of the Consortium. The government also used media propaganda to try to neutralise broad Anglophone support for the Consortium without success. Meanwhile, the Consortium organised strikes and lockdown actions that stopped the activities of schools, courts, and the economy in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions for weeks. The situation forced the government to enter talks with the Consortium leaders in the main Northwest town of Bamenda. However, to neutralise the influence of the Consortium during the talks, the government deliberately broadened the number of participants to include pro-government Anglophone syndicates that had never been involved in the strikes and protests.

There is little evidence to support the idea that the government had any interest in addressing the grievances put forward by the Consortium; it simply wanted to minimise the impact of the strikes and protests and restore normal life in the Anglophone regions. Nevertheless, the government made several short-term concessions but rejected any discussions on the core question of returning to the federal system established under the Federal Constitution. It argued that federalism was political and outside the scope of demands by the lawyers and teachers. The Consortium remained adamant about its demands and tried to extend the strike action to Anglophone primary and nursery schools in the Francophone regions.[4] The Consortium rejected government sentiments and argued that a return to a two-state federation was a precondition to guarantee that government concessions made in Bamenda would be honoured (WCA Association 2016).

On 17 January 2017, the Cameroon Minister for Territorial Administration banned the Consortium and arrested some of its leaders. Other leaders fled into exile. Barrister Bobga, President of the Northwest Lawyers' Association at the time argued that:

> The Cameroon Government had thought that by arresting and mistreating the leadership of the revolution they would psychologically torture the rest of the 'colonized' out of their revolutionary project.[5]

It was this government action that moved the conflict from peaceful protests and strikes by lawyers and teachers to the bloody conflict that has claimed the lives of over 4,000 Anglophones and government force members (HRW 2022).

Shutdown of the internet

Following these actions against the Consortium, President Biya created the National Commission on the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism by Decree No. 2017/13 of January 23, 2017 to resolve the Anglophone crisis. Rather than pacifying Anglophone leaders, the decision angered many who believed the government was trying to reduce their problem to a simple language issue; as a result, they intensified the lockdowns and school boycotts. Anglophone leaders who escaped had regrouped under the Southern Cameroons Ambazonia *Consortium* United Front (SCACUF) (Nna-Emeka Okereke 2018) and continued to lead the protest from Nigeria, which was considered safe at the time.

With the leadership of the Consortium having been dispersed, and with the media in Cameroon having been heavily censored, the social media became an important tool for mobilisation, protests, demonstrations, activism, and reporting about human rights abuses and other activities associated with 'the Anglophone struggle', as it had become known to sympathisers throughout the country and in the diaspora. There were live and regular Facebook broadcasts and posts on the progress and setbacks of the struggle, which were followed by many people, including Francophone sympathisers. Many Anglophones organised themselves into WhatsApp and Facebook groups and were very active on Twitter, which facilitated the flow of information. Anglophone activists seemed to be winning the propaganda war, despite government control of the traditional media.

Rather than addressing the masses by providing alternative and convincing information about government responses to the plight of the Anglophones and the deteriorating human rights situation in the Anglophone areas, the government saw the internet as the problem. Cavaye Djibril, President of the Cameroon National Assembly described the social media as 'a new form of terrorism' ('*cette nouvelle forme de terrorisme, toute aussi insidieuse*') (Dahir 2016). Cameroon's Communication Minister argued that the internet was used for the '… propagation of false information on social media capable of inciting hate and violence in the crisis-hit regions…' (Mukeredzi 2017).

Similarly, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication warned internet subscribers of the risk of jail terms of up to six months and fines for sharing false information (Nchewnang-Ngassa 2017). Finally, in January 2017, the government shut down internet access in the two Anglophone regions.

The internet shutdown was a total debacle in the government's attempt to defeat the Anglophone struggle. Not only did it have a negative impact on businesses, banks, and the economies of the two regions, but it also generated anger among Anglophones who had previously been unaware of the protests but were now eager to join in. Anglophone activists in the diaspora portrayed the shutdown as another example of discrimination and marginalisation by the Francophone-dominated government that was depriving Anglophones of internet access while the Francophone regions had regular access. As the deputy spokesperson for the Ambazonia Defense Force (ADF) noted: '…it further showed how Anglophones have suffered from marginalization over the years, as it was only in their areas where internet was shut down…'.[6]

The decision to shut down the internet was criticised by prominent Anglophones, including former Transparency International President Barrister Akere Muna, Kah Walla, leader of the Cameroon People's Party (CPP), and civil society and international organisations, which joined the '#Bring back our internet' hashtag campaign. Indeed, Anglophones used the internet blackout as a recruiting tool and a way of mobilising international sympathy. One wonders how much thought the regime might have put in before taking this action. It is worth noting that in 2016 the United Nations declared the internet a basic human right. Cameroon was not the only African country where the internet was shut down at this time to stifle the voices of opposition politicians and activists using social media to advocate for change. The BBC reported that during the same period, Ethiopia, Morocco, Uganda, Gabon, and the Gambia shut down the internet for similar reasons (BBC 2017).

Establishment of common law departments in Francophone universities

Another effort by the government to mitigate the crisis occurred on 21 April 2017 when it created departments of French law at the two Anglophone universities in Buea and Bamenda, and departments of common law in Francophone universities of Douala, Dschang, Maroua and Ngaoundere (Bainkong 2018). Following their establishment, Jacques Fame Ndongo, Minister for Higher Education and other progovernment supporters hailed the measure, in part, as recognition of the double heritage that characterises

Cameroon's constitutional and administrative history. Others saw in the creation of Common law departments in Francophone universities as an opportunity for Francophone lawyers and officials who are often assigned to Anglophone regions to study the Common Law (Caxton 2017).

One could only wonder why these institutions were created at this time or why it took denials, strikes, and protests for the administration to realise the importance of their institutions to nation building, considering that Cameroon's political and constitutional history is characterised by a double heritage. Some Anglophone activists rejected any claim that this measure had a positive impact on the crisis. Rather than being perceived as a positive move, it only confirmed to Anglophones that the French language was being brought more closely into 'their' English universities.[7] A law professor at the University of Buea who wanted to remain anonymous expressed the view that the establishment of common law departments in Francophone universities was irrelevant, noting that the cause of the crisis was not the paucity of common law departments.[8] In fact, the crisis was caused by a lack of respect for available common law *practices*.

Organisation of the Major National Dialogue

After three years of unresolved bloody conflict that claimed the lives of several civilians and military officers in the Anglophone regions (ICG n.d.), Biya's government convened what it called the Major National Dialogue from 30 September to 4 October 2019, chaired by Prime Minister John Ngute (Report of the Rapporteur General of the Major National Dialogue). In the absence of genuine and inclusive pre-conference consultations and consensus to determine the modalities of participation and the agenda of the meeting, the Biya government arrogated to itself the sole power to determine the nature and agenda of the conference.

In the end, the Major National Dialogue was yet another failed attempt to resolve the conflict due to the government's bad intentions (Munzu 2021). Ambazonian groups advocating for secession and other Anglophone leaders refused to attend the meeting because they were not involved in its planning. They further argued that, due to the lack of safety in Cameroon, and to establish trust, such a dialogue should take place in a foreign country with neutral mediators, a demand that the government rejected. Some opposition parties and leaders like Maurice Kamto of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) and Kah Walla (CPP) boycotted the conference, describing it as a monologue of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) (the ruling party), which lacked inclusion and which was characterised by the organisers' lack of good faith.

Although the SDF (the main Anglophone political party) and other prominent Anglophones like Barrister Akere Muna agreed to participate, some eventually walked out of the proceedings when they realised that it was simply a 'staged CPDM event'. The largely CPDM-dominated conference recommended, among other things, the granting of a special status to the Anglophone regions, the establishment of the House of Chiefs and Regional Councils, and the implementation of a decentralisation process.[9]

The government's failure to address the Anglophone question was evident. Describing the outcome of the conference to the Africanews agency, three Anglophone activists, including Justice Ayah Paul, indicated that 'only negotiation between the two sides can put an end to the war'. On the 'Special Status' matter, Ebenezer Akwanga, leader of the armed wing of the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces, noted that '…the inhabitants of Ambazonia do not need a special status. We are not part of Cameroon'. Similarly, Chris Anu, then spokesperson of the self-declared Ambazonian Interim Government (IG), asked whether the government had granted both regions 'special status' because it thought that they were handicapped, noting that the focus of any discussion should be nothing less than total independence for the people of the Southern Cameroons (Africanews 2019).

It was clear before the conference that the Major National Dialogue would not be able to address the Anglophone conflict. Firstly, there were more Francophone than Anglophone participants. How could one explain the fact that the representatives of the aggrieved party for whom the meeting was called were outnumbered by those who did not have a problem? Secondly, a discussion on the nature of the state or the Federal Constitution arrangement, which was the central question raised by the lawyers and teachers in 2016, was excluded from the agenda. So, what was the Major National Dialogue about, and which problem was the conference discussing? Finally, if the Ambazonian self-proclaimed leaders and armed groups fighting for separation against the government and military of Cameroon did participate part in the dialogue, who was the government dialoguing with at the conference, and on what topics?

Continental implications

The Cameroon Anglophone conflict is just one of a number of current internal conflicts in Africa. It has been fuelled by an error in the British decolonisation process in 1961, which refused to grant independence to Anglophones in Cameroon. A few examples of serious historical internal conflicts in Africa are discussed below.

The attempt of the Igbos of southeastern Nigeria to secede into a country called Biafra in 1967 cost the lives of over two million civilians (Curtis 2020). Originally colonised by Italy in 1890, the British defeated and ousted the Italians from Eritrea in 1941 during World War II. Rather than achieve self-government like other former colonies in the Horn of Africa, the British wanted Eritrea to be partitioned along religious lines and given to Sudan and Ethiopia (Embassy of the State of Eritrea). United Nations Resolution 390 A (V) compelled Eritrea to form a federation with Ethiopia in 1950 (Haile 1987). The complete annexation of Eritrea in 1962 by Ethiopia triggered a 30-year war between the Ethiopian forces and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) that eventually led to the independence of Eritrea after a UN-supervised referendum in 1993 (Parmalee 1993). The Cameroon government and the international community cannot afford to let Southern Cameroon follow the same route to independence.

In fact, the Anglophone pro-independence struggle in Cameroon is not dissimilar to that of Somalia, which was also nurtured by ethnic tensions and the end of a strong federation after 30 years of dictatorship. Like Cameroon, the concept of a Somalian nation is a colonial invention, following the unification of the former British colony of Somaliland (1884) and Italian Somalia (1889), which achieved independence in July 1960 as the Somali Republic. Some scholars (e.g. Mudane 2018 and Lewis 1988) have argued that not only were some Somali clans 'lost' in the original colonial borders between Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya, but the unification of the British and Italian colonies to create the new country also neglected the long-standing colonial notion of traditional clan identity. This has led to the instability still plaguing Somalia.

The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon is also characterised by the kinds of atrocities (massive killings and displacements, kidnapping of civilians, and to some extent the use of child soldiers) that were seen in other African armed conflicts like that of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony against the government of Uganda (Rice 2007). While Anglophone armed groups are seeking the restoration of the former British Cameroons, the LRA partly arose from ethnic grievances born out of colonialism, that is, the LRA wants the restoration of power to the Acholi people (Counter Terrorism Guide n.d.). Although there are fundamental religious disagreements between the LRA and the Museveni regime in Uganda, the LRA believes Museveni's rise to power brought an end to the post-colonial rotation of power between Milton Obote's northeast and Idi Amin's southwest, an arrangement it wants restored. This can be compared to the Anglophones' clamour for the restoration of the 1961 two-state federation in Cameroon.

Unlike other conflicts in Africa, the 2016 Cameroon Anglophone crisis is not a result of miscommunication, but rather of a lack of action from the government. It is an example of what happens when the governing class does not listen to the people they govern, when the majority despises a minority. In fact, despite persistent complaints from Anglophones against 'marginalisation' following the dissolution of the federation and the creation of the unitary state in 1972 (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997; Bayart 1978), the government has failed to address the 'Anglophone problem'. Instead the Anglophones have been vilified as 'enemies in the house',[10] galling even moderate Anglophone leaders.

In his letter of resignation from the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement on 9 June 1990, John Foncha, former Prime Minister of Southern Cameroon who led Anglophones into the union with Francophones on 1 October 1916, expressed his disappointment with the current state of affairs. He noted that instead of addressing the real grievances of the Anglophones, the authorities ridiculed them and referred to them as 'enemies in the house', 'traitors', and 'Biafrans'[11] (Konings and Nyamnjo 1997; Kah 2019). Similar declarations and memoranda about the 'Anglophone problem' in Cameroon from Anglophone elites and politicians during the pro-democracy movement in the early 1990s were also met with government inaction (Takougang and Krieger 1998).

From the foregoing, the proliferation of civil conflicts in Africa suggests a common diagnosis and treatment that may differ slightly across different geographies and local contexts. The African Union, like any serious continental body, should play a crucial mediation role if a peaceful Africa is to be one of its top priorities. We are by no means predicting that the Anglophone conflict will evolve into a protracted and costly war with huge human and economic losses; hopefully that does not become the case. The examples we cite above are intended to emphasise the need for urgent negotiations by both sides and acceptable compromises to achieve peace in Cameroon.

Conclusion

Few experts on Cameroon's post-colonial political history could have predicted that a protest by lawyers, teachers, and students in the Anglophone regions in October 2016 would lead to a prolonged conflict that has disrupted normal life and negatively impacted the economy of both the Anglophone and the Francophone parts of the country for over seven years.

This represents a more significant attempt by aggrieved Anglophones than Cameroon has ever seen. Not surprisingly, the government's initial response was dismissive, hoping that the protests would fizzle out just as past challenges to the Biya's administration had done, especially since the pro-democracy movement in the 1990s collapsed. However, the resolve of most citizens in both Anglophone regions to achieve meaningful change saw the regime respond by carrying out mass arrests of leaders of the protest and their sympathisers; deploying the military to the Anglophone region; and shutting down the internet because it was seen as a recruiting tool and a way of mobilising support for the struggle at home, from the international community, and from the Cameroonian diaspora. Rather than breaking the resolve of Anglophone protesters, these actions led to more protests, radicalisation, and violent responses from hitherto peaceful protesters, some of whom resorted to armed resistance, while others called for an outright, separate, and independent Anglophone state, known as Ambazonia.

By mid-2017, the government was forced to admit that the protests represented a challenge to the way it was administering Cameroon. Nonetheless, it failed to confront the core issues of the crisis i.e., the demise of the Federal State of 1961 which has resulted in the perceived marginalisation of Anglophone culture and institutions by successive administrations. Indeed, unlike pre-2016 Anglophone agitations for change, the 2016 protest created a rally in favour of the Anglophone cause that had never been seen before. Whether this can be attributed to the social media or several policy blunders by the administration, it is evident that the need to deal with the 'Anglophone problem' has gained such wide support that it can no longer be ignored. Going forward, achieving peace requires opening multiple channels of communication between the parties to build mutual trust, negotiate in good faith, put a cessation of hostilities in place, and commit to reconciliation to give peace and development a chance.

If any lesson can be learned from other conflicts in Africa rooted in the colonial past, the Cameroon government must act quickly by implementing long-term solutions to the crisis through genuine political reforms rather than its current lip service and cosmetic solutions for selfish ends. True reforms must take into account:

(1) the concerns of a new generation of Anglophones and Francophones who are questioning the history of Cameroon they have been told for long;

(2) the growth of Anglophone awareness of their Anglophone identity and quest for self-determination;

(3) the power of Anglophone pressure groups at home and in the diaspora;

(4) the proliferation of arms and armed groups in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions; and
(5) the economic and educational devastation of the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions which have resulted to the closure of several educational institutions.

Each of these areas represents a set of stakes. The Cameroon government must make sincere efforts to bring to the table all stakeholders (protestors, secessionists, and pro-government stakeholders) to discuss and address the real problems of Anglophones that are fundamentally political – they are about Anglophone identity in Cameroon and steps to provide adequate support for Anglophone schools and courts. Unless this is done, the Anglophone conflict is likely to get worse. The future of the Cameroon that was born when the former British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroun were unified remains uncertain. What is, however, certain is that at a time when much of the world is coming together to form stronger blocs, Africa does not need more conflicts, it needs as many new nations as are necessary.

Notes

1. Ambazonia is the name commonly used especially after 2016 by Anglophone activists, armed groups and sympathisers advocating for the secession of the former British Southern Cameroons (which became West Cameroon at the time the federation of Cameroon was established). The Anglophone parts of Cameroon are today known as the Northwest and Southwest regions.
2. At the time of the protest, Cameroon's Minister of Justice reported that there were 27 magistrates in Bamenda, the capital of one of the two Anglophone regions, 21 of whom (77.8%) were Francophones (ACCORD 2017).
3. Interview with Barrister H. Bobga. Barrister Bobga is a long time SCNC activist, president that of the Northwest Lawyers' Association that began the street protest that led to the establishment of the CACSC, and former leader of Anglophone Interim Government that replaced the Consortium. He is current in exile in the United States.
4. However, the extension of the strike action to schools in the Francophone region had no significant impacts, partly because of fear and likely intimidation from government, and partly because of the lack of support from Francophones who did not understand Anglophone grievances.
5. Interview with Barrister H. Bobga,18 August 2022, Maryland, USA.
6. Interview with the Deputy Spokesperson, ADF, July 2022, Maryland, USA.
7. Interview with activist and Chairperson of IG Momo County, 2019–2022, 3 September 2022, Maryland, USA.

8. Anonymous telephone interview with a professor of law at the University of Buea, October 2022.
9. For details on the Major National Dialogue see Republic of Cameroon (4 October 2019): Report of the Rapporteur General of the Major National Dialogue.
10. Emah Basile, Lord Mayor of Yaoundé, once called Anglophones '…les ennemis dans…la maison' (enemies in the house) for protesting in Yaoundé.

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