

Analysing Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis

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The Anglophone crisis has introduced a new element in the understanding of terrorism in Africa as the local population in the English-speaking regions of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon flee from military and security operations while embracing individuals designated by the state as terrorists. The escalating violence has displaced thousands of refugees to neighbouring Nigeria and could jeopardise Cameroon's upcoming Presidential election while stimulating new security challenges for the country and entire Lake Chad Basin area.

History of the Current Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon

To appreciate the dynamics of the current political crisis and violence, it is necessary to know the genesis of the Anglophone question, which began in October 2016 with demands for the restoration of a two-state federation. The British-administered Southern Cameroon (Trustee Territory) had voted to join the French-administered La Republic du Cameroon through the United Nations (UN)-organised plebiscite in February 1961. Consequently, after attaining independence in October 1961, Southern Cameroon entered into a two-state federation with La Republic as West and East Cameroon respectively.

In 1972, however, former President Ahidjo altered the structure of the union by abandoning federalism and transforming the country into a unitary state known as the United Republic of Cameroon. By 1984, President Paul Biya changed the name to La Republic du Cameroon, which was the original name of the French-administered East-Cameroon. Some opposition

Anglophone elites interpreted this change of name as an act of secession from the spirit of the Union between the two Cameroons, and amounted to forced assimilation of Anglophone identity.

Several attempts by sections of the Anglophone population to resist what they considered to be the erosion of their unique identity have lingered on since the 1972 alteration of the political structures and processes and especially since the 1984 change of name, which was contested in the courts by leading Anglophone elites. Generally, the Anglophone constitutes about 8 million out of Cameroon's estimated 20 million population.

Abiem a Tchoyi identified the causes of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon to include:

- a. Criticisms of the centralised state.
- b. Transfer of decision-making centres to Yaoundé, far from the Anglophone population and their problems.
- c. Failure to respect commitments to equitably take into account the institutional, legal and administrative cultures and traditions inherited from the former administering powers.
- d. Non-compliance to the solemn promises made during the referendum campaigns (referring to 1961 plebiscite and 1972 referendum).
- e. The change of the name of the State, from the "United Republic of Cameroon" to the "Republic of Cameroon" and
- f. Disrespect of bilingualism in the public sector, although the Constitution makes French and English two official languages of equal status.¹

¹ Abiem a Tchoyi, "Anglophone Marginalisation: Cold Hard Facts," *The Rambler*, edition No. 0037, 18 January 2017.

Dynamics of the Current Anglophone Crisis

The current Anglophone crisis is an extension of the historical resistance to the alleged assimilation of the indigenous English-speaking population. It began with the unprovoked harassment of Anglophone lawyers engaged in peaceful protest marches in September 2016 to vent their grievances over the perceived marginalisation of the Anglophone Common Law practice in the country. In October 2016, they went on strike, and in November, the Anglophone Teachers Trade Union also staged a solidarity strike to protest against the distortions confronting the educational system in the Anglophone regions.²

The targeting of the University of Buea and National Polytechnic Bamli in November 2016 by military and other security agencies, culminating in the arrest and torture of students also aggravated the present crisis. Likewise, the arrest, torture and killing of some youths engaged in peaceful protest in Bamenda and Kumba by security agencies.³

In December 2016, activist lawyer Felix Agbor Balla formed the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), which championed the initial demands of the Anglophone community that included:

- a. An end to the marginalisation and annexationist disposition of Yaounde.
- b. A return to the two-state federation in the management of public affairs in Cameroon that was the basis of the union entered in 1961.
- c. Preservation of the cherished legal and education systems of Anglophone Cameroon.
- d. Unconditional release of over 100 bona-fide Cameroonians arrested in connection with the protests in the Northwest and Southwest regions since September 2016, and

² J.D., Pefok, "The Anglophone Crisis Causes Indefinite Delay of Bar Elections," *The Post*, No. 01793, Friday, 3 February 2017.

³ International Crisis Group (2017) "Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads," Report No 250, Africa, 2 August 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/250-camerouns-anglophone-crisis-crossroads> (accessed 25 February 2018).

- e. Immediate restoration of internet services throughout the Anglophone regions.⁴

Following failed attempts to address the demands of the Anglophone population, President Biya described the agitators as "a group of manipulated and exploited extremist rioters whose activities have led to the loss of lives, destruction of public and private buildings, crippling of economic activities and the desecration of sacred national symbols."⁵ This tone in Biya's 2016 New Year eve national address to the nation set the stage for the repression of the pro-federalism aspirations of the Anglophone population.

President Biya's resolve to crush the opposition was met with civil disobedience. On 9 January 2017, Agbor Balla declared Operation Ghost Town Resistance (OGTR), which is chiefly characterised by strict compliance to a sit-at-home ritual every Monday and Tuesday or any other day declared by the CACSC leadership. During this period, the inhabitants of the two Anglophone regions in Cameroon stayed away from the offices and business premises thereby bringing all political and economic activities to a halt.

The Biya regime responded to OGTR with the proscription of the CACSC including the arrest and detention of its leaders notably Agbor Balla, Mancho Bibixy (leader of the coffin protest in Bamenda), Aforneka Fortem Neba (lecturer at the University of Buea), and Paul Ayah Abine (Justice of the Supreme Court).⁶ Other leaders such as Bobga Harmony Mbuton, Wilfred Tassary and Elias Eyambe Ebai fled from Cameroon. The Biya regime further severed internet access in the two Anglophone dominated regions of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon. This measure, which was interpreted by the Anglophone population as a redefinition of Cameroon territory, escalated the grievances against Yaounde.

⁴ Abiem a Tchoyi, "Anglophone Marginalisation: Cold Hard Facts," in *The Rambler*, edition No. 0037, 18 January 2017.

⁵ Paul Biya, New Year Message to the Nation on 30 November 2016.

⁶ Ateki Seta Caxton, "The Anglophone Dilemma in Cameroon: The Need for Comprehensive Dialogue and Reform," *Conflict Trends* 2, 2017.

The Anglophone diaspora took over the leadership of the struggle, following the arrest and detention of the CACSC leadership. The Anglophone diaspora substituted the initial quest for the restoration of two-state federalism with the demand for a separate State of Ambazonia. Several groups emerged, mobilising Anglophone nationalism within Cameroon and beyond towards the attainment of Ambazonia. Prominent among these groups include the CACSC, Southern Cameroon Peoples Organisation (SCAPO), Southern Cameroons South Africa Forum (SCSAF), Movement for the Restoration of Independence in Southern Cameroon (MoRISC) and Southern Cameroonians in Nigeria (SCINGA). Others are the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), Republic of Ambazonia (RoA), Ambazonia Governing Council (AGC) and the Southern Cameroon Youth League (SCYL). Other similar groups projecting Anglophone nationalism and aspirations were also formed in Europe and America. The Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front (SCACUF) under the leadership of Sisiku Julius Ayuktebe emerged as the umbrella organisation for all these groups. The SCACUF established the Southern Cameroon Broadcasting Corporation (SCBC) to sustain Anglophone aspirations through its propaganda. Presently, the Ambazonia Governing Council has been renamed the Interim Government (IG) of Ambazonia.

Operational Tactics of the Anglophone Activists

To achieve its political goal, the SCACUF has employed a vast array of tactics, which include industrial actions by Anglophone lawyers, and teachers that had persisted since October and November 2016 respectively, to civil disobedience through OGTR and mass protests. It also appealed to diplomatic measures including protest marches to various Embassies and High Commissions of Cameroon in Africa, Europe and America and hiring a consortium of international legal practitioners for the pursuit of its objectives. These measures have been useful for mobilising and sustaining the genuine aspirations of Anglophone Cameroonians worldwide.

Beginning from September 2017, the nature of the Anglophone nationalism in Cameroon gradually became violent. Terrorist attacks using arson against schools, bombings and attacks on critical infrastructures and security personnel were recorded while public protests intensified.

The attacks on military and security personnel by militants and aggrieved persons in the Anglophone region have continued into March 2018. Earlier in August 2017, the arrest of five persons resulted in the discovery and seizure of firearms, bipods and tripods for precision weapons, explosive charge containers, a shielding fire episcope, laser range finders and Night vision equipment with laser rangefinder.⁷

On 22 September 2017, mass protests were staged throughout towns and villages of Northwest and Southwest regions with protesters demanding separation from Cameroon. Public protests were also conducted in major capitals across the world including the UN Headquarters in New York to coincide with President Paul Biya's address to the 72nd Summit of World Leaders at the UN.

The protests were also part of the activities designed by the SCACUF to precede the eventual declaration of the independence of the Federal Republic of Ambazonia by Sisiku Julius Ayuktebe on 1 October 2017. This event was characterised by pulling down Cameroon national flags in several offices and buildings in the Northwest and Southwest and the hoisting of the Ambazonia flag; this opened a wave of sustained official repression and mild war in the regions.

The decision to restore the independence of Ambazonia was part of the resolutions reached at the Conclave of SCACUF purportedly held on 10 July 2017 at Buea, capital of the Southwest region. This Conclave also established the Southern Cameroon Ambazonia Education Board (SCAEB) with mandate to, among other things, draft a new school curriculum that is consistent with the Anglo-Saxon education

⁷ Issa Bakary TChiroma, "Terrorist Acts in Bamenda" Press Statement, Friday, 22 September 2017.

system. It also established a governing body consisting of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial arms of government including the Southern Cameroon Self-Defence Committee to protect the lives and property of armless Southern Cameroonians.

The Executive was tasked to work towards restoring the independence of Southern Cameroon within the shortest timeframe. It was the compliance to this mandate that led to the declaration of the independence of Ambazonia on 1 October 2017, an event that significantly altered the dynamics of the Anglophone question in Cameroon's national politics. By extension, it sought to violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cameroon and was vehemently resisted by the Biya administration, which deployed its elite military known as Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) and other security and administrative apparatuses to suppress the threat. Sustained military and security operations to crush the Ambazonia threat stimulated a spillover effect beyond Cameroon with thousands of Anglophones fleeing to Nigeria as refugees. The escalation of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon in the last quarter of 2017 transformed it into one of the greatest national security threats confronting the Biya administration.

In the wake of the escalation of the crisis in October, the Governing Council of the SCACUF was replaced by the Ambazonia Interim Government (AIG) following the outcome of the Fourth Conclave of the SCACUF held at Zaria (Nigeria) between 27-31 October 2017. Sisiku Julius Ayuktebe emerged as the AIG Interim President. At Cameroon Parliament in Yaoundé, the refusal of the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) dominated parliament to discuss the Anglophone crisis has led to disruptions of parliamentary proceedings by the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) parliamentarians since October 2017.

Official Responses to the Anglophone Crisis

The Biya administration's response to the Anglophone crisis has been through the use of soft and hard measures. For instance, in January 2017, the Government approved the establishment of the National Commission on the Promotion of Bilingualism and

Multiculturalism. In March 2017, the Biya administration launched the recruitment of 1,000 Special Bilingual Teachers with competencies in technical and scientific subjects to address the demands of Anglophone teachers. It also embarked on two failed attempts at dialogue condemned largely as non-inclusive.

Generally, however, the weight of state apparatus has defined the official responses towards the Anglophone crisis. This has been characterised by the redeployment of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) to the two Anglophone regions to strengthen the operations of the police and gendarmerie. Various administrative structures in both regions issued strict guidelines on freedom of movement and public conduct. In addition, the Biya administration have also sought diplomatic support to Nigeria and beyond while also accommodating the visits of high level UN diplomats and the Commonwealth in its bid to garner international support to address the Anglophone question. The crisis however still persists in the form of low-level armed resistance and criminality.

Prior to the declaration of independence of Ambazonia in October 2017, the government had arrested and detained over 100 Anglophone activists it had labelled extremists. Many of them are facing various charges including terrorism-related cases under military tribunals. Some of these detainees such as Paul Ayah Abine and Felix Agbor Balla were released in August 2017 and the charges against them dropped.

It is important to note that the released persons were among the leading activists that spearheaded the Anglophone crisis in 2016. It was their arrest and detention that created the leadership vacuum, which the Anglophone diaspora took over. Reports by the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International stated that torture and dehumanisation of detainees were a frequent occurrence, while allegations of genocide have been levelled against the Yaounde regime by the SCACUF and vocal Anglophone voices.

The response of the Biya administration to the Anglophone crisis changed tremendously following the declaration of the independence of Ambazonia. Initial official response was

the deployment of more security forces to the Northwest and Southwest regions and intensification of the crackdown of separatist elements. The escalation of tensions and violence created opportunities for guerrilla attacks from separatist/restorationists within the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF). So far, there has been the abduction and killing of security personnel including the military by the militant ADF. These attacks have resulted in the sustained internal security operations especially in the Manyu Division close to Cameroon's border with Nigeria.

In his response to the deteriorating security situation, President Biya declared war on the separatists. In a statement in November 2017, Biya stated, "it is now clear that Cameroon was at war and under attack by terrorists masking [themselves] as secessionists." Subsequently, he declared that all security measures will be taken to restore peace and order.⁸

The intensified military and security operations of the Cameroonian government have led to the flight of over 30,000 refugees fleeing Cameroon to the Nigeria-Cameroon border areas in Akwa Ibom, Benue, Cross River and Taraba States. These states share contiguous borders with the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon. As at 3 February 2018, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had successfully registered 14,057 asylum seekers from Cameroon.⁹ So far, there have been some recorded incidences of cross border violations of Nigerian territory by Cameroon security forces in pursuit of ADF militants. The Cameroon security forces have argued that Anglophone militants operate from some Nigerian border areas and then launch attacks targeting the military and security forces of Cameroon. As such, this trend could have dangerous consequences for bilateral relations between both countries.

The heavy deployment of military arsenals at Besongabang under Manyu Division, a

border community within Cameroon-Nigeria border areas in December 2017 is an indication that the Government of Cameroon anticipates further escalation and is taking basic security measures to contain further decline into chaos and insurgency.

Looking Ahead

This paper therefore makes the following informed projections:

- a. The violence in the Manyu Division could escalate leading to major military offensives and confrontations;
- b. There could be more refugees fleeing to Nigeria for safety;
- c. Inclusive dialogue remains fundamental to resolving the Anglophone question in the short term; and
- d. Unless the international community especially the African Union, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), United Nations (UN) among others shows genuine and closer commitment to resolving the Anglophone crisis, it could emerge as another major humanitarian disaster in Central Africa.

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⁸ Paul Biya, Pronouncements at Nsimalen-Yaounde Airport on 30 November 2017 following his return from the AU-EU Summit at Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire (as translated)

⁹ United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), *Nigeria: Update on Cameroon Arrival 6*, 6 February 2018.