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Secessionists movements and their implications for security in Africa: the case of Southern Cameroons

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Introduction

The 'Anglophone problem' in Southern Cameroons and what is referred to as its 'attempted secession' by the government of Cameroon has provoked renewed debate about the relevance of the idea of 'self-determination' in the 21st century. Moreover, the Anglophone problem poses a challenge not only to the efforts of the post-colonial state to forge national unity and integration (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019: 59), but to national and regional human security as well.

The conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone North West and South West regions – the former British colony and mandate territory of Southern Cameroons -- began on 11 October 2016 with peaceful protests by Anglophone lawyers and teachers. This was triggered by the central government's placement of French-speaking judges and teachers in English-language courts and schools, including a systematic erosion of Anglophone common law procedures.

Disproportionate use of force fanned the flames of violence and led to a humanitarian disaster (Caxton 2017). When, from 1 October 2017 onwards, militant secessionist groups symbolically proclaimed the restoration of the former Southern Cameroons as the state of Ambazonia, the government responded forcefully. Security forces arrested hundreds of demonstrators, including children, killed at least four people, and wounded many more (Human Rights Watch 2018:1).

The ongoing fighting between separatists and security forces has displaced more than 700 000 civilians, and driven 63 800 more into neighbouring Nigeria. It has also claimed the lives of about 4 000 civilians (Craig 2021a), besides those of members of the state security forces as well as separatists. To date, the reaction from Cameroon's international partners and the international community has been muted (ICG 2017). This is partly because the Anglophone crisis has been underreported, leading to low levels of international awareness and recognition (Samah and Tata 2021; Lamarche and Fox 2019).

This paper addresses the 'war of independence' in the former Southern Cameroons in this context. First, it considers its causes, and whether they can be addressed. Next, it reviews the responses of the Cameroo-nian government and the international community. Lastly, it draws out the implications of the conflict for human and national security and, by extension, regional security.

Reasons for the attempted restoration of Southern Cameroons

The attempted secession of the North West and South West regions and restoration of Southern Cameroons in the form of the independent state of Ambazonia have multiple causes. They stem from a poorly organised United Nations process for granting independence and the subsequent reunification of the British-controlled Southern Cameroons with French Cameroon; political grievances; and ongoing economic and socio-cultural inequalities.

To understand the current situation, one needs to hark back to events prior to independence. They can only be understood in terms of the strategies adopted by the British and French acting as the UN-mandated colonial masters of the two Cameroons.

Cameroon has a large and heterogeneous population of about 24 million people, belonging to more than 250 ethnic groups with their own languages and customs (Fombad 1991:443), and spread over ten regions. The North West and South West regions – more or less comprising the former British colony of Southern Cameroons – occupy some 16 000 of almost 475 000 square kilometres, and harbour about 5 million people (ICG 2017:1)

From 1884 to 1916, Cameroon was a German colony, called 'Kamerun'. After Germany's defeat in World War 1, it was unequally divided between the French and British, with the former occupying four fifths of the territory, and the latter one fifth. The British divided their portion into British Northern and Southern Cameroons, and the French termed theirs French Cameroon (Elango 1987:8; Enonchong 2021:9). In June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles established the mandate system for placing conquered colonies under international administration. Under this system, British and French Cameroon were administered by these two colonial powers from 1922 until 1945 when the mandates were replaced by trusteeship agreements under the auspices of the newly formed United Nations. For the sake of convenience, the

British administered its territory (both Southern and Northern Cameroons) as part of the British colony of Nigeria.

As elsewhere, the British and French adopted divergent approaches to administering the territories under their control – the former utilised their system of indirect rule, and the latter their policy of assimilation. In line with this, Southern Cameroons adopted an Anglo-Saxon governance culture, and French Cameroon a centralised republican system. These divergent approaches had far-reaching consequences in respect of language, culture, systems of governance, judicial systems, and approaches to basic freedoms (Musah 2020:36). Indeed, scholars agree that the systematic partition and subsequent administration of the two Cameroons by the French and British laid the foundation for the historical and spatial construction of Anglophone and Francophone identities in the territory (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019: 61). By extension, these systems and identities prevailed even after independence.

French Cameroon became independent on 1 January 1960 – the second French colony in sub-Saharan Africa to do so. While Nigeria became independent on 1 October in the same year, Southern Cameroons remained in limbo, as it did not want to join either Nigeria or French Cameroon. The indecision of the Southern Cameroons elite prompted the United Nations to organise a plebiscite on 11 February 1961, offering voters a binary choice between joining either the former French Cameroon or Nigeria. With the complicity of the British, they were not presented with a third choice, namely to become an independent state. Under these circumstances, Southern Cameroonians voted in favour of what they considered the lesser of the two evils, namely reunification with French Cameroon, despite their by now substantial differences in cultural heritage. As Susungi (1991) has noted, 'far from being the coming together of two prodigal sons who had been unjustly separated at birth, [reunification] was more like a loveless UN-arranged marriage between two people who hardly knew each other.'

In the same plebiscite, Northern Cameroons (the Northern portion of British Cameroons), which had a Muslim majority, opted for union with Nigeria. Today, the former Northern Cameroons forms parts of the

Borno, Adamawa, and Taraba states of Nigeria.

Southern Cameroonians hoped they would be able to preserve and protect their Anglophone identity in a loose federal union (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019:65), and that this would be assured in constitutional negotiations prior to reunification. Discussions began at a conference in London in 1960 which provided inter alia that specific arrangements for the governance framework between Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon would be worked out at a later conference consisting of representative delegations of equal status from both entities. This conference was attended by two delegations with equal status (Enonchong 2021:19). In July 1961, a conference was held in the Cameroonian town of Foumban, aimed at drafting a constitution. The Southern Cameroonian delegation favoured a loose union that would allow a degree of cultural autonomy. However, the French Cameroon delegation led by President Ahmadou Ahidjo sought to consolidate the latter's centralised executive powers and to extend them over Southern Cameroons as well (ibid).

The Foumban conference was followed by a meeting of the governing delegation of the Southern Cameroons led by Premier John Ngu Foncha and President Ahidjo in Yaoundé in August 1961. This resulted in the adoption of the Constitution of the Federal Republic by the National Assembly of the Republic of Cameroon. Significantly, neither UN nor British representatives were present at either of those two meetings. Moreover, the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly did not adopt the constitution, raising a fundamental question about its legitimacy (ibid).

Pierre Messmer, one of the last French high commissioners in Cameroon and a confidante of President Ahidjo, has been quoted as saying that he and other key role players were aware at the time that the new constitution provided for a 'sham federation' which really amounted to an 'annexation of West Cameroon' (the former Southern Cameroons) (Anyangwe 2009). Ahidjo's bad faith was further demonstrated when, in the guise of a referendum held on 20 May 1972, he unilaterally decided to abrogate the federal constitution in direct contravention of the federal constitution provisions. These events allowed the Anglophone movements to claim, in 1993, that the union between

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Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon 'had proceeded without any constitutional basis' (All Anglophone Conference 1993: 3). These manoeuvres and betrayals are the root cause of the 'Anglophone problem'. Other contributing factors will be examined below.

Political and socio-economic inequalities

As foreseen by the Anglophone elite in Southern Cameroons, reunification resulted in the territory being marginalised, reflected in worsening political, social and economic inequality. Political power was consolidated in the hands of the Francophone majority and a few members of the Anglophone elite (Chapman 2018:2). This asymmetry has been manifested in various ways.

Prior to reunification, Southern Cameroons was endowed with various economic assets such as the West Cameroon Marketing Board, the Cameroon Bank and Powercam, the port of Limbé, and airports at Bamenda and Tiko (ICG 2017:6). However, after independence and reunification, those structures and projects were neglected and allowed to fall into ruin (Mbaku 2004: 404–5; also see Anyefru 2010:96). Indeed, the Anglophone regions are among the most poverty-stricken and unequal in the country (Kumase 2018:26-35), trailing in terms of schools, hospitals, roads, and market centres, despite the region's government-controlled oil wells being a key contributor to the Cameroonian economy. Moreover, managerial positions in public parastatals such as the SONARA oil refinery and the Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC) Banana Plantation in Tiko are largely occupied by French-speaking Cameroonians (Agwanda et al 2020:5).

According to the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) at Addis Ababa University, the two Anglophone regions trail the French regions in terms of public investment. In a 2020 report, it stated that, in the 2017 budget, the French-speaking Southern region was allocated some 570 projects valued at more than $225 million, the English-speaking North West region some 500 projects worth more than $76 million, and the English-speaking South West region some 500 projects worth about $77 million (IPSS 2020: 4). This is still not an exhaustive list.

The political dynamics are similar. The Anglophone minority are under-represented in key government positions as well as the civil service. For instance, of the 67 members of government, only three Anglophones occupy high-level cabinet positions. The Speaker of the National Assembly, the Minister for Justice and Legal Affairs, the Keeper of the Seal, the Chief Justice, and the Minister for Finance are all Francophone Cameroonians (ibid; also see Takougang 1993:93-6).
So are social dynamics. Nfi notes that from the time of the late President Ahidjo to the present regime of President Paul Biya, the Francophonisation of Anglophones has been the dominant modus operandi. For instance, French dominates English in the areas of administration, education and the media. Many schools and other educational institutions in Anglophone Cameroon have been staffed with Francophones who teach lessons and set examinations in French or Pidgin English (Nfi 2014:125-7).

Anglophone frustrations extend to the judiciary as well. For instance, according to the IPSS, in 2016, some 1 265 magistrates were French-speaking and only 227 English-speaking; and of 514 judicial officers, 499 were Francophone and 15 Anglophone (IPSS 2020:4). Anglophones claim that even when they are nominated, they are forced to play subordinate roles irrespective of merit or competence (Lohkoko 2013:10).

Impact on human, national and regional security

The conflict has claimed significant casualties on both sides of the divide. However, both the military and separatist/ secessionist groups have targeted innocent civilians.

In April this year, in a report for Aljazeera, the independent journalist Jess Craig wrote that the worsening violence in Cameroon's Anglophone regions was taking an increasingly heavy toll on civilians, with renewed attacks against schools and a spate of incidents involving improvised explosive devices and extrajudicial killings documented in recent months. Citing a United Nations report, he wrote that the five-year-old conflict between government security forces and armed separatists had displaced more than 700 000 civilians and forced another 63 800 across the Nigerian border (Craig 2021a; also see Izobo 2020).

Overall, the UN estimated that three million of the four million people in Cameroon's North West and South West had been affected. At least 4 000 civilians had been killed in the Anglophone regions, a toll surpassing that in the Far North region where Boko Haram had been waging an armed campaign since 2014 (ibid).

In May, in a report for *Foreign Policy* magazine, Craig wrote that for the previous five years, factions of a secessionist movement in south eastern Nigeria and a pro-independence movement in western Cameroon had been gathering momentum, mobilizing supporters through social media and clashing with government security forces in both countries.

In April, leaders of both movements had announced a formal alliance which could ignite violence and instability in the two countries and across the West and Central African regions where violent extremist organisations affiliated with the Islamic State and al Qaeda were establishing a foothold. In early April, Cho Ayaba, leader of the Ambazonia Governing Council, and the Biafran leader Nnamdi Kanu had appeared in a press conference, livestreamed on social media, to announce a strategic and military alliance. Representatives of both movements said they would work to 'secure their shared border and ensure an open exchange of weapons and personnel'.

Craig added that the Biafran and Ambazonian movements were both fractured, and not all factions supported the alliance and rising violence. However, escalating violence in south eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon could only add to national and regional security challenges at a time when the region was already struggling with plummeting economies, democratic backsliding, and a resurgence of violent extremism and terrorism.

The stakes are therefore high, considering that the announcement of a formal alliance between these movements could ignite violence and instability in the two countries and across the West and Central African regions.

The outbreak of war in the Anglophone regions has paralyzed businesses, especially with the advent of separatist organised and respected ghost towns. Among other things, food supply lines from the rural areas to the cities and towns have been disrupted (Nwati 2021:10). The education sector has also been badly affected. Wanton kidnapping has taken hold become a new norm in the English-speaking regions, with children and teachers being used as bargaining chips (Krippahl 2019). Schools have been shut down and destroyed (Tah 2019), and water and electricity supplies have been cut off for weeks on end. Moreover, since 2016, rural health services have been disrupted due to shortages of health personnel, damaged or destroyed health facilities, and restrictions on freedom of movement, including constant road blocks (Nwati 2021: 11). According to Insecurity Insight, humanitarian access to the Anglophone regions has deteriorated. Aid workers are often misinformed by people linked to the separatist movement and have been kidnapped, individually or in groups (Insecurity Insight 2021).

Government response

When the crisis began in 2016, the Cameroon government was in denial – among others, Paul Atanga Nji, then minister in charge of special duties in the presidency, and the minister of communication, Issa Tchiroma Bakary, rejected the notion of an 'Anglophone crisis' (Kamé 2018:88; Ayang 2016:3; Kinsai and Mengnjo 2016). However, from 2017 onwards, the government adopted a more cohesive and militarised approach, banning protests and arresting and detaining leading protesters (Atabong 2017; Amin 2021:17-21). At the same time, it established a commission for promoting bilingualism and multiculturalism. This was followed by a commission on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, and the granting of 'special status' to English-speaking regions after a October

the AU's approach towards the resolution of the crisis has been sharply criticised by human right groups and other observers

2019 national dialogue (Diatta et al 2021). However, these measures have been rejected as half-baked and cosmetic. For instance, the 'National Dialogue' held in October 2019 suffered from a lack of prior consultation, and also failed to address the core issue, namely that of statehood. The granting of 'special status' and other measures emanating from the dialogue were regarded as inadequate because they only benefited the administrative elites.

International and regional response

International reaction to the Anglophone crisis has been marred by rhetorical innuendos with little or no concrete action taken. For instance, the African Union's apparent unwillingness to intervene is not surprising. When the crisis started escalating in 2017, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, then chair of the AU Commission, issued a statement calling for restraint while encouraging the Camerfoonian government to continue engaging in dialogue as a mean of finding a lasting solution (Bareta 2017). Two years later, in 2018, during a two-day visit to Cameroon, Dlamini-Zuma's successor, Moussa Mahamat Faki, called for an inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders 'based on national leadership and ownership' (AU 2018).

However, the AU's approach towards the resolution of the crisis has been sharply criticised by human right groups and other observers. For instance, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has noted: 'So far, the AU has been surprisingly reserved on the Anglophone crisis, despite the high number of casualties and the danger of wider civil conflict. This is evident from its absence on the agenda of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), and from being perceived as an "internal matter"' (ICG 2019: 3-5). Netsanet Belay, Africa director of Amnesty International, has also criticised the AU for its 'persistent inability ... to marshal the determination, political will and courage to hold member states to account for clear violations of AU principles, values and standards on especially human rights' (Durmaz 2019).

The muted reaction of some African states is not surprising either, considering that they are faced with similar security issues linked to secession. A prominent example is neighbouring Nigeria, which has expressed its support for the Cameroonian government in its fight against the separatists. President Muhammadu Buhari has bluntly stated that Nigeria would 'take necessary measures within the ambit of the law to ensure that its territory is not used as a staging area to destabilise another friendly sovereign country'. African countries have also opposed UN intervention. For instance, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Cote D'Ivoire and South Africa – all non-permanent members of the UN Security Council – have all voted against attempts to bring the crisis up for discussion (ICG 2019; Vanguard News 2018).

By contrast, in April 2019 the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the Cameroonian government to 'organise an inclusive political dialogue aimed at finding a peaceful and lasting solution to the crisis in the Anglophone regions', urging the AU and the Economic Community of the Central African States to push for talks, and calling for the EU to support this process (EU 2018). In March 2019, the United States Undersecretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, visited Cameroon and held talks with President Biya. Following the visit, he reportedly called for the release of Maurice Kamto, leader of the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon, and fellow activists, and added that the Cameroonian authorities needed to be 'more serious in their management of the Anglophone crisis' (Tantoh 2019).

In July 2019 the US House of Representatives passed Resolution 358 calling on the conflicting parties to 'respect the human rights of all Cameroonian citizens, to end all violence, and to pursue a broad-based dialogue without preconditions to resolve the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions' (US House of Representatives 2019). And on 7 June xxxx,** the US Secretary of State, Anthony J Blinken, announced visa restrictions on 'individuals who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the peaceful

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resolution of the crisis in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon' (Chimtom 2021). However, the recent visa restrictions will have very little impact because they do not target a specific group of people, whether they are in Cameroon or in the diaspora. If the US really wants to end this crisis, it should be more proactive by calling on all the belligerents (the government and separatists/leaders) both at home and abroad to come to the negotiation table.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Cameroon crisis threatens to destabilise the entire Central African subregion. It has reaffirmed that 60 years after reunification and independence, inherited borders have failed to secure the long-held ideal of national unity. Given growing perceptions on both sides that victory is unattainable, the time is ripe for a neutral party to step in and bring the disputants to the negotiating table. Moreover, as long as the conflict continues, more lives will be lost, and many more people will be displaced. This will also further strain an already ailing economy and probably increase regional instability, especially in a context where Cameroon is already menaced by insurgents from the south as a result of the instability in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Boko Haram, and a fragile Chad from the north.

Both parties should take reconciliatory and concessionary steps to de-escalate the conflict. The government should also fully acknowledge the existence of the Anglophone problem, considering that many Francophone elites and government officials are still in denial.

The Anglophone crisis has also demonstrated the limits – at least in Africa – of presidential centralism and a governance system that depends on co-option. Other governance systems and forms of statehood should be considered under which inherited cultures at independence could be harnessed for the benefit of the entire state.

Self-determination is often interpreted to mean the right to secede and declare independence. But it can also take other forms, such as local autonomy, similar to the autonomous rule Canada has granted to Québec, a federal system with a strong central government that protects minority rights, and/or a confederation of states.

Last but not least, there have been widespread calls for a referendum in Southern Cameroons as a means of resolving the ongoing crisis. It could well be beneficial for the international community to step in and organise a referendum in which Southern Cameroonians could decide once and for all among separatist, federalist and unionist options.

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