



MIND YOUR LANGUAGE: Roots of the crisis in Cameroon

By Anne Marie Befoune



Since October 2016, Cameroon - one of the most stable states in a volatile subregion - has been making international headlines. A political crisis - the Anglophone Crisis - is shaking the country to the core. It started as a sectoral crisis - with lawyers and teachers demanding for English to remain the primary language of the education and judiciary systems of the English-speaking part of the country - but later turned into a political crisis after the protests were met with military violence, mass arrests and torture.

A country in turmoil

In November 2016, hundreds of people took to the streets in Bamenda after violence was inflicted on lawyers asking for Common Law and English to remain the basis of the judiciary subsystem and on teachers asking for the non-Francophonisation of the Anglophone education subsystem. At first, many people from the northwest and southwest regions were not for separation or violence; people were peacefully protesting for change. However, denial in official statements and the continuous violent responses from the government led to the emergence of small secessionist groups that are taking advantage of the situation to radicalise local activists and non-activist citizens.

Local groups and parts of the Anglophone diaspora have revived the separatist agenda: some demand federalism, others secession.

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According to an International Crisis Group report, security in Cameroon has deteriorated in the Anglophone regions of the northwest and southwest. To protest against the government's marginalisation of Anglophones, protestors set fire to seven schools and several shops and, for the first time in Cameroon's post-independence history, homemade bombs were detonated in mid-September 2017. Between 14th and 20th September, two bombs exploded in the northwest region; there were no casualties. On 21st September, another bomb was detonated at a police station in Bamenda, injuring three police officers. A fourth bomb nearly exploded in Douala.

After the explosion, the governors of the northwest and southwest regions imposed a *de facto*

curfew, cutting off the Internet for 24 hours, barring movement between Anglophone divisions, and banning gatherings and demonstrations until 3rd October. Despite these measures, around 50,000 people took to the streets in tens of towns and communities in the northwest and southwest regions on September 22nd, demanding the departure of President Paul Biya, the release of Anglophone political leaders and separation. The date chosen coincided with the president's speech at the United Nations General Assembly. However, what was supposed to be a peaceful march turned violent in some areas. According to local newspapers, some protesters in Buea vandalised the home of the town's mayor, who is Anglophone but against the protesters. In Mamfe, a police station was set on fire. Four protesters were shot to death by police forces and several more were injured.

On October 1st, thousands of people in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon took part in a peaceful march to symbolically proclaim the independence of Ambazonia, the name of an independent country that would be located in the northwest and southwest regions. This also coincided with the anniversary of the reunification of Cameroon under French mandate and British Southern Cameroon in 1961.

The response of military forces to the march was the most repressive to date. According to Amnesty International, 17 people were reported dead and more than 200 people were arrested during demonstration. The government put the figure at around 10 deaths, but according to locals, the army killed about 100 people on that day. In total, since the beginning of the crisis in October 2016, at least 55 people have officially been reported dead.

These repressive measures led to retaliation by the populace. People burnt vehicles belonging to the sub-prefect and prefect in Boyo and Fundong (in the northwest), snatched weapons from gendarmes in Kumba (in the southwest), ransacked police stations in Ikiliwindi, Mabanda Teke and Kongle, and threw stones at police and military officers in Buea and Bamenda. Since the beginning of November, four military men have been killed in conditions that are still not clear. Cho Ayaba, a leading member of the political wing of the separatist movement who lives abroad, [told Reuters](#), "Cameroon soldiers are enforcing an occupation. The only thing that will make us stop these attacks is if the regime withdraws. If they stop using the military to impose political exclusion and systematic terror on our people."

The so-called Anglophone Crisis is not something new, as the international media suggest; it has its roots in the decolonisation era.

Currently, the English-speaking regions of Cameroon have become ghost towns due to general strikes - an initiative taken by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium as part of their long-term protest against a government they deem biased towards French speakers. For a year now, schools have not been fully operational, a lost year for students. In September, the so-called Ghost Town operations continued for three days each week. Several stores and seven schools were burnt down to protest against them opening despite the ban. Paul Biya agreed to release some Anglophone leaders and activists to stop the operations and to prevent the school year from being jeopardised for the second year in a row. However, the releases had little or no effect; enrolment rates remain very low and the ghost town operations are still ongoing.

The root of the crisis

The so-called Anglophone Crisis is not something new, as the international media suggest; it has its roots in the decolonisation era. Despite the fact that the current crisis started as a language issue between Anglophones and Francophones, the problem is not really about language; it is about

people fighting for respect, integration and identity.

In July 1884, the German government and the traditional Douala chiefs signed a treaty that established a protectorate called Kamerun. After Germany lost in World War I, the victorious powers imposed punitive territorial, military and economic provisions that led to Germany losing her colonies. Kamerun, which was a former German colony, was partitioned between Britain and France under a League of Nations mandate, which appointed France and Britain as joint trustees of Kamerun. France gained the larger share and ruled its territory Cameroun from Yaoundé. Britain's territory, Northern and Southern Cameroon - a strip bordering Nigeria from the sea to Lake Chad - was ruled from Lagos. During the period of the mandate and the trusteeship, each colonial power shaped their territories in their own image.

[A report from International Crisis Group](#) describes the situation clearly:

This resulted in major differences in political culture. English was the official language in the territory under British administration. The justice system (Common Law), the education system, the currency and social norms followed the British model. The system of indirect rule allowed traditional chiefdoms to remain in place and promoted the emergence of a form of self-government to the extent that freedom of the press, political pluralism and democratic change in power existed in Anglophone Cameroon prior to independence. The territory was administered as though it was part of Nigeria and several members of British Cameroon's Anglophone elite were ministers in the Nigerian government in the 1950s.

In contrast, the Francophone territory was directly administered by France following the assimilationist model, although colonisers and the traditional elites also practised a form of indirect government, especially in the north of the country. French was spoken and France's social, legal and political norms shaped the centralist political system of successive regimes. Battered down in a total war against the nationalist movement (Union des populations du Cameroun - UPC), which challenged French presence, the Francophone territory was less democratic.

Being used to self-administration, Southern and Northern Cameroon were in many ways more developed than French Cameroun, with several industries and a sense of democracy. French Cameroun accessed independence before English-speaking Cameroon on January 1, 1961. British Cameroon was aspiring to independence as an autonomous state, but former colonial powers believed that it would not be economically viable and advocated for not creating microstates. So a referendum took place on February 11, 1961: British Cameroon was supposed to choose between joining Nigeria or the new Republic of Cameroon. Northern Cameroon chose to join Nigeria and Southern Cameroon chose to join the Republic of Cameroon. This led to the independence of Southern Cameroon in October 1961 and the creation of a federal state with a flag with two stars symbolising the two territories coming together - West Cameroon being the former Southern Cameroon and East Cameroon being the former Republic of Cameroon. Both territories were now one under the name United Republic of Cameroon.

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A federal constitution approved by the National Assembly of the Republic of Cameroon in August 1961 and promulgated by the then president Amadou Ahidjo in September 1961 was imposed when

negotiating the terms of reunification. (Southern Cameroon was then still under the trusteeship of Britain since as it obtained independence on October 1, 1961.)

Centralisation was the governing mode of the former French territory, and the federated state was administrated from Yaoundé, where political leaders held all powers in their hands to the detriment of traditional chiefs whose authority was recognised and respected during the trusteeship. The assimilationist model the former French territory experienced under French trusteeship became its way of governance. In line with the constitutional provision stating that the vice president must be from West Cameroon if the federal president comes from East Cameroon and vice versa, John Ngu Foncha became vice president of the country and prime minister of West Cameroon.

Problems started when, despite the constitutional provision stating that English and French were both official languages, French became the language of administration. Then Amadou Ahidjo divided the country into six administrative regions and appointed federal inspectors in each region. English-speaking Cameroonians were not happy because West Cameroon could not at the same time be a federated state according to the constitution and be an administrative region by decree. The appointed federal inspector had more powers over the region than its prime minister. At the economic level, Ahidjo imposed an exchange rate of £1 to FCFA692 instead of the normal FCFA800, which reduced the purchasing power of the region that still had strong ties with Britain. Then he demanded for West Cameroon to cut ties with Britain, which made the region lose export duty advantages.

Though the southwest and northwest regions play an important role in the economy, especially when it comes to agriculture and trade, and though most of Cameroon's oil, which accounts for one-twelfth of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), is located off the coast of the Anglophone region, these regions are still lagging behind.

The economic decline of West Cameroon became evident. Reunification came with the dismantlement of the federal state/region's economic structures, such as the West Cameroon Marketing Board, the Cameroon Bank and Powercam, as well as abandonment of several projects (the port of Limbé, and airports at Bamenda and Tiko), with investments in the Francophone part of the country having more advantages. The problem still persists to date.

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When Paul Biya succeeded Amadou Ahidjo in November 1982, he further centralised power. On August 22, 1983, he divided the Anglophone region into two provinces: North-West and South-West provinces. The following year, he changed the country's official name to the Republic of Cameroon and removed the second star representing the English-speaking part of the country from the flag. (The Republic of Cameroon was the name of the former Francophone territory.) These decisions symbolically killed West Cameroon and assimilated it within the Republic of Cameroon.

The separatist agenda and the way forward

As previously mentioned, the separatist agenda is not a new one. In 1993, English-speaking Cameroonians organised the All Anglophone Conference (AAC) and called for a return to federalism. During this period, Anglophone political leaders Muna and John Ngu Foncha went to the United Nations to demand independence for former Southern Cameroon. The position of the Social Democratic Front (the main opposition party then and now with a strong contingent of English-speaking Cameroonians) was judged to be ambiguous since it was against secession, which led to the creation in 1995 of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). Since 1996, the SCNC has been demanding secession and has taken its case to the UN, the African Court of Banjul, the Commonwealth and national embassies.

Cameroon cannot afford another armed conflict. The country is already engaged in the fight against Boko Haram in the far north and militias from the Central African Republic in the east. The president has to take drastic and lasting measures to solve the crisis.

Despite the situation being a stalemate, measures have been taken to solve the crisis: there have been several attempts to dialogue; about a thousand English-speaking teachers across the southwest and northwest have been appointed; a Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism has been created; and leaders of the separatist movement have been released. In reality, however, these measures were doomed to fail from the start. Dialogue was actually the government trying to impose its conditions on the English-speaking leaders at the table. And the Commission is nothing but the recycling of former members of government or people with close ties to it.

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Firstly, the president should act as if he cares about the situation and spend more time on national soil instead of abroad. Secondly, a mediator should be appointed to negotiate high-level talks between the government and the separatists, be they on national soil or from the diaspora, since the diaspora is playing a major part in the movement. Thirdly, each official who has ever been publicly disrespectful when addressing or talking about English-speaking Cameroonians should apologise and resign.

The law on decentralisation promulgated in 2004 should be enforced, not for regions to operate autonomously, but for each of them to be in charge of social and financial development of the region for the sake of the region and of the country as a whole. English-speaking regions of the country are not the only ones suffering from bad governance, so this will be an opportunity for the government to solve the crisis and improve the desperate situation of the country as a whole. The best way to go about this is to work on these issues before the next presidential election that is supposed to take place in 2018.

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