The Anglophone Cameroon crisis: 
June 2018 update

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Summary

Relations between the largely Anglophone regions of Cameroon and the country’s dominant Francophone elite have long been fraught.

Over the past three years, tensions have escalated seriously and since October 2017 violent conflict has erupted between armed separatist groups and the security forces, with both sides being accused of committing human rights abuses.

The tensions originate in a complex and contested decolonisation process in the late-1950s and early-1960s, in which Britain, as one of the colonial powers, was heavily involved.

Federal arrangements were scrapped in 1972 by a Francophone-dominated central government.

Many English-speaking Cameroonians have long complained that they are politically, economically and linguistically marginalised. Some have called for full independence for the Anglophone regions.

The immediate trigger for the current crisis was the appointment of French-educated judges to courts in the English-speaking regions. Local lawyers demanded their removal and the restoration of a federal system of government.

By the end of 2016, local teachers and lawyers had launched a campaign of strikes and demonstrations. University students and other activists began to get involved too. The security forces responded heavily-handedly. The Internet and all educational institutions were closed down. In December 2016, four protesters were shot dead during protests outside a ruling party meeting in the city of Bamenda.

Tensions remained high during the first half of 2017. Then, on 1 October 2017, the anniversary of Anglophone Cameroon’s independence from the UK, Anglophone separatists in a group called the Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front unilaterally declared independence. Mass demonstrations were met with force. Amnesty International estimated that at least 17 people were killed in the clashes.

In recent months, there has been an increase in the number of kidnappings in the two Anglophone regions. Ransoms are often demanded in return for release. By late May 2018, at least 50 people had been kidnapped.

Ordinary civilians are increasingly caught in the middle in what some are now describing as a ‘dirty war’. Civil society is also facing harassment, with several journalists being detained and facing what human rights groups believe to be politically-motivated charges. Meanwhile, there have also been reports of clashes between rival armed separatist groups.

At the end of May, over two dozen alleged insurgents were reportedly killed by the security forces in the town of Menka – the bloodiest clash since the violence began.
The UN estimates that around 160,000 people have been internally displaced by the crisis, with another 20,000 fleeing into Nigeria.

Presidential elections are due to take place in October 2018. President Paul Biya is likely to seek re-election and is widely expected to win again. Few impartial observers think that the election will help bring about peace. It is impossible to say how many people in the two Anglophone regions support secession.

The UK government has called on all sides to de-escalate violence and begin dialogue. The US government, which trains Cameroonian military personnel, has specifically accused the security forces of carrying out “targeted killings”.
1. Overview

Relations between the largely Anglophone regions of Cameroon and the country’s dominant Francophone elite have long been fraught. These economically important regions, which are officially called ‘Western Cameroon’ but ‘Southern Cameroon’ by pro-independence supporters, comprise about one-fifth of the country’s population.

The tensions originate in a complex and contested decolonisation process in the late-1950s and early-1960s, in which Britain, as one of the colonial powers, was heavily involved.

Many Anglophone Cameroonians argue that they were denied the right to meaningful self-determination at the time of independence and that federal arrangements introduced at the time were subsequently illegitimately dismantled by the Francophone-controlled central government.

Many also claim that the central government privileges the majority Francophone population. They complain (with some justification) that they have been marginalised within the state, including in the education and judicial systems. Finally, they complain that they do not benefit much from the oil which has been found in the region.
2. History and its legacies

*Europa World Plus* provides this historical background, which helps to make sense of the current crisis in Anglophone Cameroon:

The German protectorate of Kamerun was established in 1884. In 1916 the German administration was overthrown by combined French-British-Belgian military operations during the First World War, and in 1919 the territory was divided into British and French spheres of influence. In 1922 both zones became subject to mandates of the League of Nations, which allocated four-fifths of the territory to French administration as French Cameroun, and the other one-fifth, comprising two long areas along the eastern Nigerian border, to British administration as the Northern and Southern Cameroons.

In 1946 the mandates were converted into United Nations (UN) trust territories, still under their respective French and British administrations. However, growing anti-colonial sentiment made it difficult for France and Britain to resist the UN Charter’s promise of eventual self-determination for all inhabitants of trust territories. In 1956 French Cameroun became an autonomous state within the French Community, and on 1 January 1960 proceeded to full independence as the Republic of Cameroon. Ahmadou Ahidjo, the leader of the Union Camerounaise, who hailed from northern Cameroon, was elected as the country’s first President.

In the British Cameroons, which were attached for administrative purposes to neighbouring Nigeria, a UN-supervised plebiscite was held in 1961 in both parts of the trust territory. Voters in the Southern Cameroons opted for union with the Republic of Cameroon, while Northern Cameroons’ voters chose to merge with Nigeria. The new Federal Republic of Cameroon thus comprised two states: one comprising the former French zone (Cameroun Oriental), and the other comprising the former British portion (Cameroun Occidental). Ahidjo assumed the presidency of the federation. He marginalized the radical nationalist movement, led by the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), as well as the federalist anglophone political élites. Ahidjo gradually eroded political pluralism and strengthened his control over the political system. In 1966 the Union Nationale Camerounaise (UNC), was created as the sole legal party and it assumed full control of Cameroon’s organized political and social affairs. In June 1972 the country was officially renamed the United Republic of Cameroon, thereby dissolving the federal state and reducing the powers of the sub-national states. The powers of the presidency increased significantly, at the expense of the Government and Parliament, and Cameroon became a highly centralized state.1

The British government of the day opposed there being a ‘third option’ for British Cameroonian voters at the time of the 1961 plebiscite: an independent state. This stance was widely supported by other governments at the UN. The British view was partly based on a conviction that such a state would not be economically viable, but also

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on the its wish that both parts of British Cameroons should merge with Nigeria. However, things did not go according to plan and the southern part of British Cameroons voted instead to merge with French Cameroon.

Contemporary supporters of the cause of Southern Cameroonian independence view the 1972 referendum that led to the end of federalism in Cameroon as rigged. It took place during a period when Cameroon was a one-party state in which the Francophone elite was dominant.

It should be noted that there is some ambiguity in how the term ‘independence’ is used by its supporters. For some, this must mean full independent statehood. Supporters of full independence often refer to the putative state as ‘Ambazonia’. For others, a return to genuine federalism might suffice.

There is little doubt that the former British territories that opted for merger with Cameroon in 1961 have been relatively marginalised since independence. But it is impossible to judge how much support the cause of full independence has on the ground today.

There continue to be important differences between Anglophone Cameroon and the rest of the country that it opted to join in 1961. The main difference centres on language. French dominates the public realm in Cameroon, despite a long-standing official policy of bilingualism. Most Southern Cameroonians characterise the region as still predominantly English-speaking.

However, while there is much truth in this statement, a bit of caution may be justified on this count. A 2008 academic study noted that, in a country of over 250 African languages, a significant minority of Cameroonians spoke neither French nor English. But it also acknowledged that ‘pidgin English’ was the lingua franca in the bulk of the country, with at least 50% of the population speaking it. It added there was also an emerging ‘Camfranglais’ or ‘Francamglais’ amongst the young in Cameroon’s two main cities, Yaounde and Douala.

These observations suggest that the ‘Anglophone’/‘Francophone’ linguistic distinction may be more blurred in everyday life for ordinary Cameroonians than contemporary advocates for the independence of Southern Cameroon might suggest.

Another important difference is the legal system in Southern Cameroon, which is based predominantly on UK-derived common law. But critics of the central government argue that the autonomy of this legal system has been progressively eroded, with the use of French increasingly being imposed in local courts. There are similar complaints about the marginalisation of English in schools and universities.

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2 Tove Rosendal, “Multilingual Cameroon: Policy, Practice, Problems and Solutions”, University of Gothenburg, 2008
3. 2015-17: main developments

Since 2015, tensions have escalated seriously – to the point that serious violent conflict has now broken out.

The immediate trigger was the appointment of French-educated judges to courts in the English-speaking regions. Local lawyers demanded their removal and the restoration of a federal system of government, which was abandoned in 1972.

By the end of 2016, local teachers and lawyers had launched a campaign of strikes and demonstrations. University students and other activists began to get involved too. The security forces responded heavily.

Then in December 2016, four protesters were shot dead during protests outside a ruling party meeting in the city of Bamenda. In January 2017, an umbrella protest group, the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) was banned and two of its leaders were arrested.

Members of the diaspora began to mobilise and try to get Western governments to take a stand.

Tensions remained high throughout 2017. Schools remained closed and the Internet was shut down in the two regions. Some individuals carrying explosives were arrested by the authorities.

A weekly day of strike action was called by the CACSC. By August, it had extended this to three days a week. The Cameroon government sent a delegation abroad to counter lobbying of Western governments by diaspora activists.

As the new school year approached in September 2017, the government released the two of the protest leaders in the hope that this might lead to schools reopening. But this did not happen.

Restrictions were imposed on freedom of movement and the land and maritime borders of the two Anglophone regions were blocked. Up to eight more protesters reportedly died in street demonstrations in September.

Then, on 1 October 2017, the anniversary of Anglophone Cameroon’s independence from the UK, Anglophone separatists in a group called the Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front unilaterally declared independence. Mass demonstrations were met with force.

Amnesty International estimated that at least 17 people were killed in the clashes. Amnesty said: “the security forces must cease unnecessary and excessive use of force, and protesters should be peaceful if they want to make their voices heard. The government should investigate these killings.”

Violence increased significantly in the two regions from October 2017 onwards. Anglophone militants carried out eight attacks against military and police during November, killing at least ten people. A new group
called the Ambazonia Defence Force claimed responsibility for some of these attacks. Others were committed by a group calling itself the Tigers of Ambazonia.

By the end of the year, the secessionist insurgency was gathering momentum. The number of security forces personnel killed in English-speaking regions in November-December 2017 totalled seventeen. Dozens of civilians were reportedly killed by the security forces.
4. Events during 2018 and future prospects

In a new year’s speech, Cameroon president Paul Biya suggested that he wanted dialogue, beyond a reported relaxation of the Internet ban in the two regions and the addition of several new Anglophone ministers to his cabinet, no other initiatives were undertaken to bring this about.

By the end of January 2018, 43,000 refugees from the two regions had reportedly fled into Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Nigerian authorities arrested at least 47 separatist activists based in its capital, Abuja, triggering protests in the diaspora. They were subsequently extradited to Cameroon and are still in detention there.

In February 2018, as the violence continued unabated, new separatist armed groups – the Banso Resistance Army and the Donga Mantung Liberation Force – emerged.

In the same month, the separatist Interim Government of Ambazonia Governing Council, a group which has so far disavowed violence, warned the Cameroonian authorities against holding senatorial elections, planned for 25 March, in the North West and South West regions. The elections went ahead but turn-out was low.

In recent months, there has been an increase in the number of kidnappings in the two Anglophone regions. Ransoms are often demanded in return for release. By late May, at least 50 people had been kidnapped. 12 European tourists were briefly detained by armed separatists in April.

Ordinary civilians are increasingly caught in the middle in what some are now describing as a ‘dirty war’. Civil society is also facing harassment, with several journalists being detained and facing what human rights groups believe to be politically-motivated charges.

After video evidence emerged, the authorities have admitted that one separatist leader in detention was brutally mistreated and have promised to bring those responsible to justice. Meanwhile, there have also been reports of clashes between rival armed separatist groups.

At the end of May, over two dozen alleged insurgents were reportedly killed by the security forces in the town of Menka – the bloodiest clash since the violence began. At the same time, seven people – including one senior figure, Mancho Bibixy, were sentenced to 10-15 years in jail in connection with the ongoing unrest. Again, it is claimed that these sentences were politically-motivated.

Some analysts expect that armed separatists may increasingly target French companies operating in the two Anglophone regions. Over half of Cameroon’s cocoa exports originate there, so such tactics could hit the economy significantly. The UN estimates that around 160,000 people have been internally displaced by the crisis, with another 20,000 fleeing into Nigeria.
Presidential elections are due to take place in October. President Paul Biya is likely to seek re-election and is widely expected to win again. Few impartial observers think that the election will help bring about peace.

It is impossible to say how many people in the two Anglophone regions support secession. Plenty would probably still be satisfied by a return to meaningful federalism. But, although there was a limited cabinet reshuffle not long ago, there is no indication that the central government is willing seriously to consider restoring anything approaching federalism.

Catholic bishops have recently begun to try and mediate. Meanwhile, a process of radicalisation appears to be strengthening the hands of the secessionists – but there are serious tensions between some of the different armed separatist groups involved on the ground, which further complicates the prospects for a peaceful settlement further down the line.
5. Response of Western governments

Many members of the Anglophone diaspora living in the UK strongly believe that the UK, as a former colonial power, retains responsibility for what happens to its former subjects. Successive UK governments have resisted this view. These governments have called for peaceful dialogue but have declined to take a view on what the best institutional arrangements might be for addressing the grievances of Anglophone Cameroonians.

However, the international community – the UK included – has begun to engage more directly since the beginning of 2018. The EU, US, France and Equatorial Guinea have called for dialogue to end the violence.

The UK’s Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin visited Cameroon on 13-14 February. While there, she urged all sides to de-escalate the conflict and begin dialogue:

During her visit to Cameroon (13 and 14 February), the Minister visited the Anglophone region to discuss the ongoing dispute. Meeting with senior members of the Cameroonian Government, traditional rulers, human rights groups, and members of civil society organisations, she encouraged restraint and for a de-escalation of current tensions.

On the situation in the Anglophone regions, Minister Baldwin said:

‘As a long-standing friend and Commonwealth partner, the UK wants to see urgent steps taken on all sides to de-escalate current tensions.

President Biya’s announcement in his New Year speech of steps to rebuild trust, resume dialogue, and allow decentralisation are a welcome start – but only a start. Cameroonians need to come together to talk and to secure a peaceful resolution.’

During her visit to Cameroon, the Minister discussed issues around democracy, security, prosperity and human rights in meetings with Prime Minister Philemon Yang and other senior ministers, as well as with representatives from Cameroonian and UK businesses and civil society organisations.

Similar messages have been reiterated on several occasions by UK ministers since then. The UK government has said it is ready to help Cameroon in resolving the crisis, should the UK’s good offices be requested – but this would in practice mean an invitation from the Cameroon government, which seems unlikely to arise.

In April, the UK adjusted its travel advice for the two regions, advising against all travel to the border areas with Nigeria and essential travel only in the rest of those regions.

France has traditionally given strong support to President Biya and, while it may well have had more forthright things to say in private, has so far not taken a strong public position.
In mid-May, the US Ambassador to Cameroon, Peter Barlerin, accused government forces of carrying out “targeted killings” and other human rights abuses in the two Anglophone regions. He also criticised separatist violence.

However, the US continues to provide assistance to the Cameroon armed forces in connection with its campaign against Boko Haram and other jihadist armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin region. Questions have been asked about whether troops trained by US personnel might be implicated in alleged human rights abuses by the security forces in the Anglophone regions of the country.
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