

Conflicts and Crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone Region

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FONKEM ACHANKENG I, NOV 11 2018

Interest in “nonviolent conflict escalation” is on the increase in some parts of the world in 2018 with the number of nonviolent campaigns growing exponentially since 1980 (Sorensen & Johansen, 2016). However, in the Cameroon Republic, the Government has continuously used military force as the only resort to the identity conflict and the crisis between the Government and the Cameroon Anglophone region, aka former British Southern Cameroons. Despite some timid calls for dialogue from some countries and international organisations, including the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and the African Union, the Government of Cameroon persists in its determination to employ military violence to silence the Anglophone region. I characterize the conflict as intractable, because it was repressed for many decades and it has morphed into a violent war perceived as a zero-sum game, which appears irreconcilable and central to life in the Cameroonian society.

For decades, nonviolent protests were a recurrent presence in the political life of the postcolonial state of Cameroon in terms of the intractable identity conflict between the Government of Cameroon and ex-British Southern Cameroons’ nationalists. Such protests re-occurring yearly around historical dates like February 11 (Plebiscite Day), May 20 (United Republic Day) and October 1 (Independence Day of ex-British Southern Cameroons) by the people of the Anglophone region were generally met with violent repression in the form of arrests, torture, incarcerations, and killings. From October 2016, some media outlets in the West have reported that “violence was hitting Cameroon over English versus French” (Kindzeka, 2016). According to the few news reports in the western media, “several people were killed and hundreds more were arrested or missing in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon in violence that followed rallies by the country’s English-speaking minority” (Kindzeka, 2016, p. 1).

In 2017, before October 1, the protests were very peaceful. On October 1, however, when the restoration of independence was proclaimed, some 122 people in the region celebrating that proclamation were reportedly killed by government troops. The killings and exactions were exacerbated in the weeks following that date. According to the Centre for Human Rights & Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) based in Buea, the people were labelled “dogs” and the military was reportedly breaking into homes and, either shooting young men on their legs or arresting others even from church services. It is in response to that situation that the people of the region called on their young people to arm themselves in self-defence as they could not sit by and watch the military to kill, maim, rape, torture them and burn down their villages with impunity. With militias in the Anglophone regions attacking and killing 6 soldiers and police, and a formal declaration of war on the region on November 30, 2017, the situation evolved into a fratricidal war.

The war and the ensuing crisis have resulted in several thousand killed, more than a hundred villages razed to the ground, and thousands of refugees and displaced persons. According to International Crisis Group (2018) “over the last year alone, the conflict in the Anglophone region had caused the deaths of at least 400 civilians, 170 military and police officers and hundreds of separatists, with more 250 security officials wounded.” The UN also reported that more than 43,000 people from Cameroon were seeking asylum in Nigeria as a result of the war and that by September 2018 more than 180,000 people were displaced in the region.

Intractable conflicts “often concern existential and basic needs such as recognition and security, the fulfilment of

Conflicts and Crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone Region

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which is essential for existence and survival. Often, therefore, they are multifaceted, touching on wider aspects of political and cultural life. The conflicts penetrate the societal fabric of both parties and force themselves on individuals and institutions" (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998, p.761). Also, this intractable conflict resulted from a historical development against the knowledge of the incompatibility theory of plural states (Furnivall, 1986; Smith, 1986; Bennet, 1986; Walzer, 1982). How would this mixing of a British colony and a French colony be conflictual in the Cameroons?

As was the case in some postcolonial states in Africa and Asia, the United Kingdom and the United Nations made the error of trying to make a single state, in the Cameroons, out of two separate UN Trust Territories of different colonial traditions, cultures and peoples. Bringing together, in the Cameroons, two nations of different colonial cultures and experiences was inevitably going to lead to conflict and violence as is typical in situations of different identities. Incompatibility theorists long argued that plural societies could not remain both stable and democratic. This thinking has a longstanding tradition in the social sciences. From the Duke of Sully in the 17th century to modern scholars such as Janowsky (1945), Claude (1969), Mill (1972) and Schermerhorn (1978), they share the similar views that when redistributing a territory, it will be impossible for a united multinational state to function with people who have incompatible characteristics like language, law and tradition. Experiences in the Indian sub-continent, the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, former Czechoslovakia, the three colonial Somalis, Namibia in South Africa, Eritrea in Ethiopia, the Timorese in Indonesia, Western Sahara, and Sudan are a few examples in not very distant history. The conflicts and crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone region are not different. In the context of the Cameroon conflict case, two writers captured the point very eloquently. One, Victor Epie' Ngome, using a Biblical analogy, titled his work of fiction, "What god put asunder." The second writer, Rotcod Gobata (2011) in his article, *The Ironies of Our History*, observed that the "English and the French belong to one common stock and are next door neighbours...they have lived for millennia without ever attempting direct mixing because their respective cultures and ways of thinking are too divergent." He concluded that "the case was not different for the Cameroons on whom the respective cultures and languages of Britain and France were foisted by historical circumstances." We can therefore trace this conflict to a flawed decolonization of the territory, the political marginalization and economic strangulation of the people and territory since 1961, and the government's assimilationist agenda cloaked as 'national integration.' For a clearer understanding of the conflicts in the region and the dynamics, we may borrow from historical, political, and legal accounts on the postcolonial nation-state of Cameroon.

In an article in the *East Oregonian* of June 6, 2010, Harriet Isom, US Ambassador to Cameroon from 1993-1996 observed that "the dichotomy between the former British part of Cameroon and the larger, dominant, former French colonial part still exists." Subscribing to this viewpoint, Yaounde University political historian, Verkijika Fanzo (2017) affirmed that "Tensions between English-speaking Cameroonians (Anglophones) and the West-Central African nation's French-speaking government stretch back to the end of colonial rule nearly 60 years ago." At the heart of the tension, Fanzo contended, is the desire of Anglophones to form their own independent state, Ambazonia.

The conflicts and crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone region are between the part of the country that was once run by the British (1916-1961), and the larger part once ruled by the French (1918-1960), which were foreseen in the decolonisation of colonial countries, peoples, and territories. The warnings on the political future of the people of the Cameroon Anglophone region were ignored in favour of the geo-politics of the West during the Cold War. Before 1960, often referred to as the year of African independence, the people of ex-British Southern Cameroons were self-governing with functioning democratic institutions. They also had internationally recognised boundaries. Possibly speaking from the unstable experience of plural societies, United States Ambassador Clement J. Zablocki warned at the 896th General Assembly meeting that "the results of a hurried choice imposed on the population of the Trust Territory of British Cameroons would be catastrophic for their political future." Krishna Menon, Ambassador of India, expressed similar concerns that his "delegation [saw] no reason why the Southern Cameroons [should] not achieve independence on the same date like Nigeria and Northern Cameroons." In Britain, Hon. G. M. Thompson (M.P. Dundee East) addressing the British House of Commons on the poor handling of the case said: "The problem of uniting these two territories would in any event be difficult. They are two territories of completely different cultures with different political systems –there are extremely complex problems in bringing these two countries together within one national state." By compelling the British Southern Cameroons to achieve "independence by joining", the United Kingdom and the United Nations were in effect ignoring these warnings as well as arguments of incompatibility

Conflicts and Crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone Region

Written by Fonkem Achankeng I

theorists of multinational states.

After strenuously refusing to grant sovereign independence to the territory, Britain forced a Plebiscite on the people, asking them whether they wished to achieve independence by joining the Republic of Nigeria or the Republic of Cameroon. The vote went in favour of achieving independence by joining Cameroon. The United Nations General Assembly followed up the vote to pass the Resolution 1608(XV) of 21 April 1961 to grant the British Southern Cameroons independence in association with Cameroon. Atemnkeng (2014) has argued that by this Plebiscite, Britain had already sealed the fate of the people by forcing them, whether they wanted it or not, to choose only between some form of association with Nigeria or Cameroon.

The British Southern Cameroons' joining the Cameroon Republic on October 1, 1961 was on the understanding of an equal partner situation in the Federal Republic of Cameroon. However, as Fanso (2014) suggests, the first President of Cameroon had started "confiscating the independence of British Southern Cameroons even before it was accorded at the joining." In the President's mind, the joining merely signified the accommodation of British Southern Cameroons as the western part of German Kamerun. Yet Britain, who claimed she would not transfer the British Southern Cameroons as a dependent territory to the Cameroon Republic, looked on with no objection even when the British always knew the Cameroon Republic and British Southern Cameroons were not a Franco-British Condominium, that is, a house jointly managed by two equal masters. The people of the Cameroon Anglophone region also fault the United Nations as the trustee for failing to implement UN principles in regard to the independence of the territory which they renamed the Ambazonia Republic. They argue that colonial rule in and militarisation of the Anglophone region by the Republic of Cameroon constitute a breach of international peace and remain incompatible with international instruments. Notwithstanding Article 47 of the Federal Constitution, which was categorically against the abridgement of the federal system, the Federal Republic of Cameroon lasted only ten years six months and was dismantled in May 1972. The Anglophone region was then annexed in a United Republic, and in 1984, the word "united" was scrapped (Anyangwe, 2018). The country became the Cameroon Republic, as the former French colonial part was called at her independence. The English-speaking regions were then progressively assimilated into the French-speaking area.

By considering British Southern Cameroons merely as part of German Kamerun that returned 'home,' the authorities of the Cameroon Republic refused to view the national and cultural differences between the two territories as a source of national strength. Rather, they viewed the differences as a danger to nation building and opted for a policy of national integration, which only sought to dismiss, repudiate, and systematically obliterate former British Southern Cameroons by imposing French values and ways of life on the people. For more than a half a century, the people of the region have accepted all acts of constitutional law, civil law, criminal law, and administrative law imposed on them by the authorities as acts which one does not like but has to tolerate them in order to survive (Yongbang, 2014, p. 235). Narratives of the people of the Anglophone region demonstrate that the two groups do not have much in common except at the surface if we consider their different worldviews about education, law and order, governance, conduct of elections, the dignity of the human person, and other aspects of a nation's life. From his many experiences living in Yaounde for many decades and his knowledge of the situation, Fanso (1999, p. 10) concluded that "Anglophones and Francophones are still strange bedfellows."

There is evidence that the people of the Cameroon Anglophone region have long complained that their language and culture were marginalised as a result of annexation and colonial occupation by the Republic of Cameroon (Nfor, 2000; Anyangwe, 2014). Fanso (2017) observed that "The dignity and statehood of the Anglophone region was silently destroyed by the government led and dominated by Francophones." By October 2018, the people of the Anglophone region continued to decry the steps taken by the government to completely 'Frenchify' everything Anglo-Saxon in Cameroon. Some of these are the recent inclusion of the soccer leagues of the region in those of the adjacent French-speaking regions of West and Littoral; the dissolution of the General Certificate of Education Board into a parastatal with officials exclusively appointed by the government per decree No 2018/514 of 22 October 2018 to reorganise the GCE Board, and the exclusive use of the French language in some major areas of national life in a supposedly bilingual country. Existing in the margins of Cameroon's political and economic life and feeling the loss of their identity in the postcolonial country, the people of the Anglophone region sought an end to annexation and assimilation, and their own independent state as voted for in the United Nations in April 1961 (UNGA Resolution

Conflicts and Crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone Region

Written by Fonkem Achankeng I

1608 (XV).

In the conflict and violence waging in the postcolonial state today, the people of the Cameroon Anglophone region expect both the African Union and the United Nations to uphold and enforce their own principles and laws. They expect the Organisations to take effective measures to mediate the full implementation of the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence (UNGA Res. 1514 (XV) relating to the region, and to uphold her territorial integrity. As well, they expect the African Union to uphold, respect, honour, and enforce the provision of its own constitutional text, Article 4 (b) of the Constitutive Act, which reaffirms the principle of intangibility of borders of each African country as inherited on the date of achievement of independence. On October 4, 2017, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission issued a statement reaffirming the commitment of the African Union to promote peace “in line with the principle of the intangibility of African Borders as they existed at independence.” The people of the Anglophone region expect the African Union to go beyond the rhetoric by giving teeth to its commitment to this founding principle of the continental organisation. The people also call on the United Kingdom and the United Nations to return to fix the problems they created for the territory and her people. The other side, the Government, uses the power and advantage of a sovereign nation-state with the backing of the same United Nations to avoid dialogue and a negotiated settlement of the conflict. In lieu of dialogue, the Government escalates the conflict by waging war under the guise of fighting “secession” and “terrorism” within the nation-state.

As the people of the region wait in expectation, the world continues to watch as a fratricidal war unfolds in Cameroon between the two former UN Trust Territories of British and French trusteeships put together within one postcolonial state against the knowledge of the incompatibility theory of plural states discussed earlier. In characterising the conflict as intractable from the perspective of incompatibility theorists, the analysis of the conflict should get beyond the discussion of culture and language analysis by Gobata (2011) and others to an understanding of the issue of the inalienable right of the British Southern Cameroons’ people to self-determination or sovereign independence. As have been indicated elsewhere within the larger framework of the aspirations and universal rights of the people of this former UN trust territory, this understanding becomes more compelling than the cultural and language framework espoused by Gobata and others (Fonkem, 2013). As a people in international law per the 2009 ruling of the African Commission on Human & Peoples’ Rights in Communication 266/2003 on the conflict, the people of ex-British Southern Cameroons have the right to aspire for sovereign independence. As a self-governing people from 1954 with full functioning state institutions, the people of the region were the first in Sub-Sahara Africa to organize free, fair, and transparent multiparty elections in 1959 and to peacefully and democratically transfer power from a governing party to the opposition. A people with such history cannot be obliterated in the Cameroon Republic.

Five recent developments in the Cameroon Anglophone region have significantly show how urgent or exasperated the yearnings of the people are to the conflict. They include the massive turn out of the people of the region waving peace plants on September 22, 2017 to demand peaceful separation from the imposed joining with the Republic of Cameroon and massively supported restoration of the sovereign independence restoration proclamation of former British Southern Cameroons on October 1, 2017 in spite of militarization by the Cameroon Republic. We also have the massive boycott of the 2018 May 20 National Day celebration of Cameroon, the massively celebrated 1st anniversary of the restoration of independence of Southern Cameroons on October 1, 2018 in defiance of combat troops, and the boycott of the October 7, 2018 Presidential election in the Cameroon Republic. These developments all attest to the fact that the people of the region have collectively made up their mind about the union.

As the crisis degenerates, the results of the Presidential elections were announced in favour of the incumbent President, Paul Biya. The election results remain contested by some and may end up creating another conflict in the country. But the people of the Anglophone region have merely watched without any involvement in the events following the election, which they boycotted overwhelmingly, citing the election as “a political process in a neighbouring state.” The first question on many minds is whether Africa and the world community will continue to look away as another genocide unfolds in Africa, and particularly, in a postcolonial nation-state put together in a framework hackneyed by the United Nations in 1961 as “independence by joining.” The second question is whether the world community will continue to consider some people mainly in colonial terms as expendable and therefore not deserving of independence in an increasingly interdependent world committed to fundamental freedoms and rights of all peoples. And third, in view of the flaws of the decolonization of the territory, will Western powers who recognized

Conflicts and Crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone Region

Written by Fonkem Achankeng I

Djibouti or French Somaliland and the struggles of Kosovo continue to turn a blind eye on the fratricidal war in the Cameroon Anglophone region?

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Conflicts and Crisis in the Cameroon Anglophone Region

Written by Fonkem Achankeng I

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