

**Cameroon's Crises,
Crisis Group briefing to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, 15 June 2018**

Cameroon has many features of countries that have fallen into conflict, including highly centralized and personalized leadership, political manipulation of ethnic tensions and widespread corruption. It is beset by crises, some generated from the outside and some of its own making, that severely threaten its stability. While the Boko Haram threat in the country's Far North has subsided, the government must now deal with a bigger concern, the escalating protests in the Anglophone region that are becoming a full-blown armed insurgency. Unfortunately, the government's crackdown, including credible reports of abuses by security services, is exacerbating the unrest. The Anglophone grievances must be addressed politically, like the other politicized regional and ethnic divisions in the country. But the government is unwilling to negotiate or engage in meaningful dialogue with any of the myriad movements opposing it. This unwillingness to engage was clearly demonstrated in May when six Anglophone protest leaders, none of whom had engaged in or advocated violence, were given heavy prison sentences. Elections in October 2018 likely will increase discontent as well.

Enacting and implementing the needed reforms will be difficult. The 85-year-old President Paul Biya has led Cameroon since 1982 and intends to run for another seven-year term. His government's reflex is to buy off any prospective opponent it can, while treating anyone it cannot as subversive. The law is unevenly applied to favor those who show loyalty to the regime, a pattern repeated in the distribution of state resources and jobs. The result is that most of the country's power and wealth has accrued to elites close to the president and his ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement. Furthermore, the regime reacts to peaceful demonstrations and other criticism with periodic clampdowns, with scant regard for human rights.

The co-optation of elites with state largesse, and the emigration of many educated young people, have provided a safety valve, but lack of reform and continued poor governance mean that people no longer believe in the rule of law or peaceful political change. There are thus multiple risks of conflict, especially in the build-up to elections in October and beyond.

Cameroon's partners have frequently provided the regime with decisive assistance. Though this has come with pressure for reform, very little has been done. The regime has now factored a low level of international criticism into its calculations and seems intent on pursuing its course. The danger is therefore that it now sees any challenge as a threat and is likely to harden its stance as the polls approach.

Most donors and other international partners are reluctant to criticize the regime. But the regime must engage in serious dialogue with Anglophone leaders to avoid a civil war and enact comprehensive governance reforms to avoid additional instability. Donors should use their leverage, both financial and diplomatic, to send far stronger messages to the government.

Background

The roots of Cameroon's current problems lie in the colonial period, when "state building" was done at the expense of pluralism. In the independence era as well, an aversion to

dialogue and an inability to accommodate discontent or minority views has blocked political reform. The ensuing frustrations have led to periodic explosions of violence.

In the late 1950s, there was widespread unrest when the French banned the main party opposed to colonial rule, the popular Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC), leading to a bloody and protracted guerrilla war. France granted independence in 1960, but the insurgency persisted. President Ahmadou Ahidjo used it as a pretext to declare a state of emergency, take full executive powers and fend off calls for a national conference to decide on post-independence political arrangements. Following a UN-sponsored referendum in 1961, the southern region of British-controlled Anglophone Cameroon voted to rejoin Francophone Cameroon, while the northern region voted to remain with Nigeria.

With a weak negotiating team, Anglophone Cameroon allowed Ahidjo to impose a constitution that, while formally federal, had all the hallmarks of a French-style centralized state. It did little more than adjust the 1960 constitution of French Cameroon and allowed for direct election of the president, which Ahidjo correctly calculated would reinforce his position. There were few guarantees to enact what was to be, on paper, a “union of equal parts”. The resulting frustrations linger today in Anglophone Cameroon.

By the late 1960s the civil war in the west Bamileke region was ending, but the regime was still obsessed with unity and stability. It was autocratic, and it considered pluralism and diversity unacceptable threats to the nation-building project.

The resignation of President Ahidjo in November 1982, and the handover of power to his prime minister, Paul Biya, initially went smoothly. But tensions soon emerged, culminating in a coup attempt in April 1984, blamed on Ahidjo loyalists. It was violently put down, with no process of reconciliation to follow. The trauma of this period is still a source of bitterness for many from the north, Ahidjo’s home area. Equally, some from the south, including in the security forces, fear reprisals stemming from the unfinished business of 1984.

In the early 1990s, opposition parties emerged, and multi-party elections were held. The regime was seriously threatened at the ballot box and in the street, and frustrations led to widespread violence in 1991. But President Biya and his ruling party prevailed and started to restore authoritarian rule behind a façade of democratic practice.

Today, the nation-building project has frayed, as the economy has stagnated, and unemployment and inequality have risen. The economy is weighed down by corruption, a poor business climate and the low price of oil, production of which constitutes 10 per cent of GDP. The population benefits very little from what economic growth there has been, based mainly on natural resources exploitation. Opposition forces are weak, and popular anger is very high.

Escalating Tensions

The country now faces violence in three regions: the Northwest and Southwest, where an Anglophone insurgency emerged in late 2017, and the Far North, where Boko Haram continues to mount small-scale attacks. The current crisis is the most serious and bloody internal conflict the country has known since the civil war of the 1960s. Added to this is a rampant insecurity and refugee crisis in the East and Adamaoua, which host some 236,000

people from the Central African Republic. Elections in October 2018 will be a major test, as will the eventual transfer of power away from the aging President Biya.

Armed Insurgency in the Anglophone Regions

The crisis in the Anglophone regions is now a deadly armed insurgency. While there are hardliners among the militants, the government bears a large share of the responsibility for the conflict. It failed to recognize legitimate Anglophone grievances; its security forces committed widespread abuses; and it imprisoned many peaceful activists in early 2017.

Several small “self-defense” groups (Vipers, Ambaland forces and Lebialem Red Dragons, to name a few) now operate alongside a couple of larger armed militias: the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), the Tigers of Ambazonia and the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces. Since November 2017, these groups have launched a series of attacks against military and police barracks that have killed scores of soldiers and gendarmes. An unknown number of separatist fighters have died in these clashes though (some military officers estimated 200 separatists have been killed). The military crackdown also involved significant human rights violations. Security forces have killed at least 150 civilians since October 2016 and burned dozens of villages. Some Cameroonians NGOs claim the numbers of civilian casualties and destroyed communities are much higher. Armed militants have also killed more than a dozen civilians (termed “black legs”) suspected of collaborating with the Cameroonian security services. Around a thousand Anglophone activists or presumed separatists have been arrested, with 400 still in jail. 34,000 Anglophones are refugees in Nigeria and some 160,000 are internally displaced.

The government’s refusal to launch a dialogue with peaceful Anglophone leaders has corroded the community’s trust in state institutions and provoked escalating violence. A direct dialogue between the government and Anglophone community leaders is critical to de-escalate the crisis. A wider conversation, which should include discussion of different models of decentralization (or regionalism such as in Germany) and federalism, is also important, given the failings of the current model. The U.S. should take advantage of the government’s concern about its international image and desire to preserve cooperation with them to nudge it toward direct talks and a national dialogue.

Boko Haram: still a threat to the neglected Far North

Since 2014, Boko Haram has killed about 1,900 Cameroonian civilians and 200 soldiers and gendarmes, as well as burned and looted dozens of villages. The conflict also has displaced some 242,000 people, driven 91,000 of them to neighboring Nigeria and badly disrupted the local economy. Though battered by security forces and riven by internal divisions, Boko Haram could regain strength if Cameroonian authorities—overstretched by the growing insurgency in the Anglophone region—neglect the crisis.

The war against Boko Haram has strained local communities, given rise to humanitarian crises and highlighted the need for longer-term development. The immediate challenge is to stimulate the local economy without filling the coffers of Boko Haram, which taxes local trade and in the past has recruited in part by offering small business loans and other financial incentives. Achieving the right balance will be difficult. But support for small businesses within the formal and informal economies could undercut local backing for Boko Haram. Separately, while Yaounde has long controlled the Far North by co-opting local notables,

Boko Haram's spread into Cameroon was partly facilitated by tapping into anger at local elites. Instead, the U.S. should encourage the state to reassert its presence in the north in a participatory and inclusive manner rather than through proxies, including via development projects that boost local earning potential.

The Elections and an Eventual Transition from President Biya

The 2018 elections are likely to see Biya and the ruling party retain power, but polls seen as manipulated or unfair would make it even more remote from citizens and feed greater levels of violence. Election season will be an especially risky time if, as appears likely, Anglophone militants attempt to disrupt the balloting in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and possibly elsewhere. Several political parties are designing strategy to "protect and defend" their votes, while some civil society movements are planning to boycott the elections and to express their discontent in October in the streets of Yaoundé and Douala, hoping to build momentum for a popular uprising, such as occurred in Burkina Faso.

Because so much power is vested in the president and most government institutions are weak, an additional concern is the risk of major instability if the president dies or is incapacitated. The U.S. and other actors should start laying the groundwork for a peaceful transfer of power; the longer the situation deteriorates, the harder it will be to pick up the pieces. It should do so first, by supporting dialogue between the government and Anglophone leaders, as described above; and, second, by working with Cameroon's electoral commission and deploying election observers to protect the integrity of the vote, as best possible, and thus build confidence in the electoral system. Even small gains in these areas would help mend the torn contract between the Cameroonian state and its citizens.

What can Congress Do?

The Anglophone Crisis

- Insist the Cameroonian government allow credible independent investigations into allegations of abuses by security forces and punish those responsible. Reexamine defense cooperation and development aid if it does not do so.
- Continue to urge the government to pursue dialogue with Anglophone leaders and not reflexively oppose any discussion of federalism. Help identify a neutral mediator, potentially the Catholic Church, to help break the dangerous stalemate.

Combating Boko Haram

- Provide more support to the humanitarian crisis and rebuilding of the Far North. But also require Cameroon to do more to stabilize the Far North. Support international assistance to Cameroonian government efforts.
- Urge the Cameroonian government to tackle the post conflict demobilization of the vigilante units, as well as the deradicalization and reintegration of ex Boko Haram members. Support efforts of the Cameroonian government in that direction.

Elections

- Sustain international support and attention to the elections. Cameroonian elites are sensitive to outsiders' judgment and their image abroad. Be positioned to intervene with one voice. Ambassadors in Yaoundé should coordinate. This should also be done at the capital level. Try to expand pressure groups from just the "West" to include other democracies and concerned countries from the South.
- Continue to encourage president Biya to think about his legacy.

