President Paul Biya and Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: Now is the Time for Bold Action

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Over half a century ago, the Kerner Commission Report on the state of race relations in the US concluded that America was “Moving Toward Two Societies, One Black, One White—Separate and Unequal [i]”. Given the on-going crisis in Cameroon, and to paraphrase that study in another context it is possible to conclude that currently Cameroon “is moving towards two societies, one Francophone, one Anglophone—separate, hostile, and unequal.”

During the last two years, Cameroon has been engulfed in a brutal conflict. Known as the Anglophone Crisis, a peaceful strike began by teachers and lawyers quickly turned into a revolt against the marginalisation of the English-speaking regions of the country. In typical fashion, the government’s response included intimidation, arrests, jail, and torture [ii]. As a result, voices that called for complete secession of the Anglophone regions from the La République du Cameroun gained momentum, restored Gorji Dinka’s Ambazonia Republic idea, created an interim government in exile, and engaged in guerrilla war tactics. They formed a military wing, Ambazonia Defence Force, and have used it to hit back at government forces and fortifications [iii].

They have barricaded highways, destroyed property, kidnapped government officials, and dared the military to follow them into their hide-outs. Through protest activities such as “ghost town,” they have disrupted economic and social services in the Anglophone regions of the country. Massive casualties have been reported by both sides. Nationwide, the Anglophone Crisis has become a major topic of discussion, and despite the continuous presence of government forces in the region it remains unclear how the crisis will end. In fact, history could hardly have devised a more frustrating problem for Cameroon’s, and Africa’s longest ruling “strongman.”

It was for this reason, and against the advice of friends, colleagues, and family, that I went to Cameroon to more fully understand the on-going crisis, to contextualise the struggle, to learn and listen to ordinary voices. Why did things deteriorate so quickly, and what does the government need to do to turn the tide?

**Conversations in Cameroon’s economic and political capitals**

During my first few days in Douala, the economic capital of the nation, everything seemed normal. I purposely stayed at the Akwa Palace Hotel and Hotel Saffana because both had a reputation of large numbers of people moving in and out. “Ambazonia has cost us business,” employees repeatedly told me. Because of general insecurity resulting from the struggle, movement from one region to the other was restricted. I met and discussed with many people including officials from privately owned television stations such as Canal 2, whose “Tough Talk,” programme on the Anglophone Crisis challenged the government to examine its “soul”[iv]. Henry Kejang, a co-creator of the programme...
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noted that audiences were fed-up with “injustice.”

It was a way of life for those at the top. For too long politicians took the Anglophone region for granted and finally something snapped. The Anglophone Crisis resulted from decades of “neglect, abuse, and exploitation,” Kejang noted. Others confirmed. In responses to my questionnaires many stated that after almost four decades in power, it was time for Biya to step aside. “He started off well,” a friend of Beti ethnic origin stated, but later “poured sand in his pot of soup.” “Biya cannot even eat the soup he prepared,” he continued. It was striking to hear intense criticisms from people who hailed from the Beti/Bulu region, Biya’s ethnic group. A recurring theme was that Biya had failed the aspirations of the Cameroonian people, and the problems were compounded because he was using antiquated and obsolete ideas to solve today’s problems.

In the capital city of Yaoundé, I visited the University of Yaoundé II at Soa, International Relations Institute of Cameroon, University of Yaoundé I, The Catholic University of Central Africa, and several other places. There, I had more conversations about the crisis. Rarely had an issue gripped the national dialogue as this one did. In a discussion with both Francophones and Anglophones at the Restaurant du bois Sainte Anastasie in the centre of town, opinions were blunt. “Yaoundé has changed...there is no money,” one person noted. “If they [Anglophones] want to separate, let them go,” another stated. “Bamenda people are the source of all the problems...even though they are the chief beneficiaries of new appointments,” one person said, adding “they will never be satisfied with what has been given to them.” All present lamented at the loss of innocent lives. When I informed the group that I heard similar stories in the Southwest Region especially in Kumba, many were surprised. “Are you serious that you went to Kumba,” one asked. Given the nature of the protest in Kumba, the question was right on target.

**Kumba: “Ground – zero” of the Anglophone protest**

Located in Meme Division, Kumba is the largest city in the Southwest Region. It is a business centre and serves as a gateway for businesses from the Littoral Region and Manyu Division. The city’s reputation for style, friendliness, and nightlife is well-known and preceded it especially after the hit song “Competition for Kumba,” came out in the 1970s [v].

From a distance, Kumba looks like a shanty town but up close it is home to tens of thousands who always return there. It was home for me. I grew up there, knew the ins and outs of the city, and have been back annually for over two decades. But during this visit the town was different.

The Douala – Kumba highway went through several towns including Tiko, Mutengene, Muea, Ekona, Muyuka, Malende, and closer to Kumba were the communities of Bakundu Banga, Ediki, Mbalangi, and so on. From Bakundu Banga, roughly 30 miles (48 kilometres) from Kumba, it was clear that something was wrong. The communities looked deserted. Driving through Mbalangi was painful. Mbalangi is normally packed with people selling food items by the roadside. On the Sunday evening when we drove through the community we saw a few goats and chickens but not a single human being. Doors of homes were bolted. Mbalangi and the other communities had heaps of ashes of burnt buildings and bikes.

The tactic of stoking fear through burning communities has been commonly used by government forces during this crisis. Villages in Meme, Manyu and Lebialem divisions have been hit many times. A visit to communities such as Kwakwa, Kake I, Kake II, Ediki, Foe Bakumbu, Kembong, Ekomb, and many more was revealing [iv][v]. Huge sections of some the communities had been turned into ashes prompting someone to ask if such tactics qualify as “crimes against humanity.” Few acts infuriated the people more than the destruction of communities. A friend informed me that her family home in Ekombe, which had lasted for generations was burned down. Others shared similar stories. People were shuddered at the destruction of ancestral homes and property. While some left the community for other regions, others rushed to join the ranks of the Ambazonia Defence Force.

Located in the outskirts of urban centres, these communities had become the frontline in a deadly embrace between Cameroon government troops and the Ambazonia Defence Force. It was indeed the loss of innocence of a people, and many of them were now likened to what the US General Norman Schwarzkopf once referred to as “collateral damage” when he discussed the large number
of civilian casualties in the US-Iraq War. What we saw in those communities were no longer images or photos posted on the Internet. What we saw was real, and chills ran down my spine. Often, we stopped, slowed down, looked around, and the silence among us spoke volumes. But we hurried to arrive in Kumba before it turned dark because gunshots often began at night.

The highway between Kumba and Muea was among the most dangerous roads in the country. Possibilities of kidnaps, barricades, and gunshots were high. Owners of private vehicles resorted to using public vehicles for fear of attacks. Between Kumba and Buea, a journey of less than sixty miles (less than 100 kilometres), there were at least five military check-points. When our vehicle was checked everyone descended and walked across the barrier in a single file and as you showed your documents you were let through to the other side. It was as if one was crossing from one country to another. In addition, a recurring concern was no one knew when members of the Ambazonia Defence Force would show up. As drivers drove pass colleagues coming from the opposite direction they frequently asked: “that boys them dey road [are those boys by the road?]”

There was an eerie feeling and it continued into Kumba. Kumba was and remains heavily militarised. Military officers, many in their twenties, walked around with guns drawn-out in ready-to-shoot position, and their faces covered with black cloth. Some of the guns had red ribbons wrapped at the top. At a department store, the owner welcomed me with a hug and quickly whispered that behind me was one of the Ambazonia fighters who had come to collect money the group requested. Based on stories, the practice seemed routine. People told me they had been asked to donate money to support to cause. They were terrified; noting that failure to do so may result in something terrible happening on their well-being. Extortion is rampant. A local businessman informed me that he avoided answering his phone because he was asked to contribute 200,000 francs (US $400). “I don’t have it…so they have to just do what they have to do,” he said.

Rumours were rampant. The stories were endless. Some dismissed them as lies coming from what is typically referred to as “radio half-battery.” I heard numerous stories about the magical abilities of the Ambazonia fighters. They could appear and disappear at any moment, many said. Even very informed and educated people subscribed to the notion that those fighters had supernatural powers. They had ghosts fighting for them, and will win, I was repeatedly told. Even government soldiers bought into the façade. They wrapped red ribbons around their guns to dispel any spirits, I was told. At times I was gripped by fear, and that made my visit more important. Context matters. Occasionally, if I could be frightened by those stories, then it is understandable why ordinary people not well-schooled in the rules of evidence would have believed them.

Conversations about the Crisis took place regularly and often in private. In the living room of a family I visited, I asked why everyone was whispering? The response was that, on the topic, no one knew who to trust anymore. Once one person began to whisper, it quickly became contagious. Repeatedly, I was warned by friends and family to be careful. Almost everyone in the community knew someone who had either been displaced or killed. There were stories of mass graves. People seemed to have given up. Young people talked about violence and techniques of torture in a manner, which was foreign. Kumba had entered a different, and an unfortunate space. To understand, to see, and to feel it, one had to be there. People looked aged and the faces of many were now riddled with wrinkles. It is indeed true that peace and stability can never be taken for granted. Increasingly, there was the argument that to solve the problems Biya must release those he captured and put in jail including Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, the interim leader of the Ambazonia Republic.

Others stated that Biya “doesn’t care.” “Is he even in the country?” some asked. “When was the last time he was seen in public?” another asked. Biya was frequently absent from public view. In his nearly 40 years in power, he has visited the Southwest Region less than six times. People are angry, scared, and worried about their community, future, and well-being. Each day, gunshots were heard in the outskirts of the town. Each day truckloads of military officers were driven through the city. Each day, there were new stories. Many were hopeful but believed that things may get a lot worse before the tide is turned.

The Kumba market, typically a major meeting point, was operational but lacked the usual crowd and ambiance. The protest had taken its tool. People talked about the crisis at length, how they initially supported it but now wanted their lives back, and most importantly felt trapped between the
Ambazonia and government forces. The crisis produced the type of brutality, which was only found in novels or foreign action films, and now it was a reality in Cameroon. A friend talked about a military officer he knew who was captured and killed in a community outside of Kumba. He was decapitated, and the rest of the body split into two Disc parts.

Despite the atrocities, there was little new about the complaints, which gave rise to the Anglophone Crisis. Those grievances have been heard before. But this time something was different. Years ago, I had written in an analysis of another anti-Biya protest that: “Youth activism, social media, improvement in communication and transportation, the resilience of African people, and their determination to demand change irrespective of consequences present new challenges to strongman rule” in Africa. The Anglophone Crisis and government response reflected that conclusion. Social media especially WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other .com media outlets changed everything. Images of burnt buildings, corpses, police brutality, and other forms of atrocities were readily posted on social media. Those postings hardened the resolve of pro-Ambazonians and served as a recruiting tool for more fighters for the group. While the context was not always clear, those images garnered sympathy for secession. Biya’s long silence in the face of mounting violence gave pro-Amazonians control of the narrative. Cameroon Radio Television, the government television station, failed to make the case against secession acting as if the Anglophone Crisis was just a little headache that would eventually take care of itself.

“The fierce urgency of now”

For all the difficulties, Biya alone has the key to the solution of the problems. First, he must accept and realise the changing times. Youth culture in the age of WhatsApp and so on is different from what it was during the first “ghost town” activities almost 30 years ago. Attempting to use the lessons from them to address the current crisis translates into misusing the lessons of history. The bulk of those who make up the “engine room” of today’s crisis came of age after those early protest activities. They are impatient, and rightfully so. They have gone to school, done the right things but seem to see no bright future. They live in a society of plenty but continue to swim in an ocean of poverty. They see on social media the lifestyle of politicians and wonder how they can get away with such magnitude of fraud and corruption.

Biya must approach this group directly and make the case as to why he is still relevant as the president. He must be up front, resist the invisibility, which has characterised his style of politics. Decades ago, a confidential US Central Intelligence Agency assessment concluded that Biya was a “savvy” politician but questioned his judgment when he remains silent for long periods during a crisis, because that “caused unnecessary uncertainty and questioning about who was in-charge”[vii]. Though written many years ago, that assessment remains relevant today. In fact, Biya is still to make a major policy speech addressing the Anglophone Crisis. It is no surprise why people continue to wonder whether he has been properly briefed about the seriousness of the crisis.

Biya wrote in Communal Liberalism that a government had to be accountable to the people [viii]. He is being summoned to act on those words he eloquently wrote in his book. Given the complexity of the problems and the unprecedented nature of the crisis, Biya’s actions must be equally unprecedented. He should create an economic package like the US Marshall Plan, which will infuse massive economic assistance to the development of local communities. The Marshall Plan was crucial in the rebuilding of Western Europe after World War II. The programme will show Cameroonians that the president genuinely cares.

Because of decades of exclusion of Anglophones from key positions in the nation, the government must establish an “affirmative action” type of programme designed to correct past wrongs. For too long Anglophones were kept away from the vital centre of authority and resource allocation. Measures must be taken to bring them into the system and to dismantle institutional barriers, which prevent Anglophones and others from rising beyond certain levels. The practice of restricting them to only certain cabinet and management positions must stop. These measures will go a long way to begin to reform the system.

Early in his tenure, Biya labelled his domestic policy as the New Deal, modelled after Franklin D.
Roosevelt’s New Deal policy. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal was guided by boldness and persistent experimentation [ix].

If a policy failed, he went to the next one. Biya must do likewise because problems such as the Anglophone Crisis are complex and deeply rooted in the nation’s history.

There are talented people in Cameroon who can bring fresh ideas to the table. The president should therefore put together a “brain trust” and charge it with the responsibility to suggest solutions to move the nation beyond its current stage of development. Cameroon is endowed with tremendous human and natural resources, and as such can be a greater nation. Programmes must be instituted to garner the attention and energy of youth towards national development. Other nations have done so successfully. Biya must bring into his circle or advising team people who are progressive, forward-looking, and knowledgeable about current global trends and youth culture. The world and especially the Cameroonian society is very different from what it was a few decades ago.

Finally, Biya “cannot escape history” but can work to “heal it.” Failure to address the Anglophone problem is not an option. After two years, there must be a realisation that so far, the military solution has been unsuccessful, and any plans to intensify it after the presidential election will be futile. Rather than squandering time and energy on new commissions and their reports, Biya can solve the Anglophone problem with a stroke of the president’s pen. If there was ever a time when ruling by decree is helpful, now is the moment. How Biya addresses the Anglophone Crisis may turn out to be the single most important measurement on how history will judge his presidency.

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Endnotes


President Paul Biya of Cameroon has been silent for long in relation to the ongoing unrest in the country's English speaking region. His silence has made matters worse and it is time he took decisive measure to resolve that crisis if he wants history to remember him after his nearly 40 years in power.

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