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Julius A. Amin
University of Dayton, jamin1@udayton.edu

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President Paul Biya and Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: A Catalogue of Miscalculations

Julius A. Amin, University of Dayton

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Abstract
The historical literature on Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis traces its origin to the failure to implement the Foumban Constitutional Agreement. The current study adds a new perspective: Based on extensive field work in Cameroon and a variety of primary and secondary sources, this paper argues that Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis, which began in October 2016, degenerated into violence because of a catalogue of miscalculations made by President Paul Biya’s regime. It also argues that the crisis has had a devastating impact on the way of life in the Anglophone region. This paper concludes with recommendations on what needs to be done to turn the tide in the Anglophone region. This study not only fills an important gap in the literature on the Anglophone Crisis and on the struggle for change in the country; it also contributes to postcolonial Cameroonian and African historiography overall.

Introduction
Recent political struggles in Cameroon have engulfed the nation into what is known as the Anglophone Crisis. A peaceful protest started in October 2016 by lawyers and teachers quickly turned violent, as Cameroon President Paul Biya’s military responded to the protest with
intimidation, arrests, and torture. Some responded with a call for complete secession of the Anglophone regions from La République du Cameroun and the creation of a virtual Ambazonia Republic and an interim government in exile. They formed a military wing, Ambazonia Defence Forces, and used it to attack and disrupt economic and social services in the region. As of June 2019, four million people had been affected by the crisis: Over 1.3 million needed humanitarian assistance; over 450,000 were internally displaced; over thirty-two thousand became refugees in Nigeria; and over two thousand have been killed. And the conflict rages on today (Africanews 2019; United Nations 2019).

In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon (1963) argues that eventually an oppressor overreaches and the people turn to violence as “the only thing that pays.” Violence becomes a “cleansing force” for the oppressed, and one way for them to gain “self-respect” (Fanon, 61, 94). The Anglophone Crisis fits into Fanon’s analysis. The actions of Biya’s military machine to peaceful gatherings triggered young men to create the Ambazonia army and turn to violence. Initially, the response of protesters was spontaneous and unplanned, but with time it became more organized. After witnessing the burning of their homes and communities by Biya’s military, losing relatives to the conflict, and experiencing chronic unemployment and poverty, the protesters took up arms and turned to violence (International Crisis Group 2017). The young men who ignited the flames had grown fed up at the unfulfilled promises of reunification. The young men were tired of hanging out and doing nothing, and as responses to questionnaires would show, the Anglophone Crisis aggravated an already desperate situation for the region’s youths who made up over 60 percent of the population. While officially the nation’s youth unemployment was placed at a little over 5 percent, the reality on the ground, especially in the Anglophone region, shows the figure to be significantly higher. The World Bank reported that
the poverty levels in the two Anglophone regions, Northwest and Southwest, in 2019 were 57 percent and 21 percent respectively—among the highest in the nation (World Bank 2019).

This paper argues that the Anglophone Crisis arose from a catalog of miscalculations made by Biya’s regime. It also reveals that the crisis has had a devastating impact in the Anglophone regions including an erosion of aspects of the people’s way of life. This paper concludes with recommendations on what needs to be done to turn the tide in the Anglophone regions. The analysis builds on but also takes a fresh approach from the existing literature (Achime 2018; Amaazee 1990; Anyangwe 2018; Anyefru 2017; Awasom 2000; Kamé 2018; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Nfi 2014; Nguh Fon 2019; Pommerolle and Heungoup 2017). This study relies extensively on the voices of locals, allowing for analysis by Cameroonians living through the crisis. Field work took place in the Cameroonian cities of Yaoundé, Bamenda, Buea, Douala, Limbe, Kumba, and Tiko between April 2017 and May 2019. Data came from 400 open-ended questionnaires distributed to both Francophone and Anglophone residents, as well as oral interviews. Of the 225 responses to questionnaires, seventy-five came from Francophones, the rest from Anglophones. Of the 130 people contacted for oral interviews, 50 participated; forty were Anglophones, while ten were Francophones. Given the level of suspicion and fear that resulted from the Anglophone Crisis, many expressed reluctance to participate in the project. Those who participated were assured of anonymity. Among those interviewed were students, petit traders, ¹ farmers, religious leaders, teachers, unemployed persons, civil servants, homemakers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and businesspeople. Their formal education levels ranged from elementary school to advanced degrees. Respondents were often the most negatively affected by the crisis. Some lost jobs, businesses, and homes; many witnessed upfront
the brutality of the conflict. These oral sources allow this paper to analyze the impact of the crisis on the people’s way of life.

This study also discusses the increasing importance of social media as a new weapon in protest activities in the region. It argues that social media was a game-changer during the crisis. It was used effectively to inform, plan, and mobilize supporters of the protest. This paper integrates Francophone voices in the analysis of the crisis. In doing so it challenges traditional perceptions that Francophones dismissed the Anglophone protest as something fomented by a few people determined to destabilize the nation. Finally, this study fills an important gap in the literature on the Anglophone Crisis and the struggle for change in the country; it also contributes to postcolonial Cameroon and African historiography overall.

**Contextualizing the Crisis in the Nation’s History**

Cameroon, typically referred to as “Africa in miniature,” has a population of twenty-five million people belonging to 230 ethnic groups and speaking over two hundred languages. Annexed by Germany in 1884, Cameroon remained a German colony until 1916, when Germany was pushed out of the colony; in 1922, it split into two unequal halves and fell under the rule of Britain and France. Britain received one-fifth of the former German Kamerun, a narrow strip of territory stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Chad. Britain outsourced its own section of Cameroon to Northern and Southern Nigeria. Both Cameroons, for administrative reasons, were treated as two separate territories, but very limited economic development took place there. The history of the region’s development under British rule has been well covered (Amaazee 1990; Ngoh 2019). In 1960, French Cameroon obtained independence as the new Republic of Cameroon, and in a plebiscite on February 11, 1961, British Southern Cameroons voted to reunify with it. That July, representatives from both sides met in Foumban and created a a two-state federation approved in October as the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The 1961
constitution promised much, including equality of both federated states, respect of the political and economic institutions of each state, promotion of bilingualism in the country, and economic development of both states. However, the reverse was true for the Anglophone regions. Anglophone Cameroon received limited political and economic rights. Even after the nation promoted its image as a bilingual nation, English was systematically marginalized. The Anglophone Crisis, therefore, began from the very creation of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Each subsequent generation within the Anglophone regions has protested Francophone domination of their region (Achimbe 2018; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Le Vine 1961, 7–8).

Though Anglophone residents made up roughly twenty percent of the country, they felt cheated out of key ministerial positions such as defense, finance, public service, external relations, and director of civil cabinet at the presidency. They felt cheated out of major positions such as general manager in companies (Anyefru 2017; Mbipgo 2016; Takougang and Amin 2018). Moreover, even though since 1992 the prime minister has typically come from the Anglophone region, he is not next in command; the next in command is the president of the senate (Achimbe 2018). In short, Anglophones felt left out of the vital center of power in Cameroon.

In 1982, Biya succeeded Ahmadou Ahidjo, Cameroon’s first president, in a peaceful transfer of power and signaled that he would preserve Anglophone cultural heritage and institutions. He said as much when he visited Buea and even spoke in English. In Bamenda, he labeled the town his “second home,” reminding people that though he was a Beti/Bulu, he was president of all Cameroonians (Ndi 2016, 264). But within a few short months, he resorted to his predecessor’s policies. Less than a year into Biya’s leadership, his minister of national education,
René Ze Nguele, designed plans to submerge into the French educational system one of Anglophones’ most significant educational pillars, the General Certificate of Education (GCE). It was a necessary step, he argued, toward the harmonization of the two educational systems (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003, 163, 172).

Simultaneously, within two years of taking office, Biya made one of his most daring moves when he signed Law No. 84/001 of February 4, 1984. This law changed the name of the country to the Republic of Cameroon, the name East Cameroon took when it obtained independence in 1960. Anglophones were furious. Their leaders had been neither consulted nor given any advance warning, and as Emmanuel Anyefru has written, Biya’s action was “unilaterally and unconstitutionally decreed” (2017, 108). Anglophone leader Fon Gorji Dinka, a former president of the Cameroon Bar Association, had a straightforward reaction, informing Biya that changing the name of the country nullified the Foumban Constitutional Agreement (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003, 73). Dinka advocated that Anglophone Cameroon withdraw from the Republic of Cameroon to form the Republic of Ambazonia. Though Dinka’s pronouncement received minimal support at that time, his action revived a sense of Southern Cameroon’s consciousness, which until then had remained buried somewhere within avid nationalists of the region. It was only a matter of time before such consciousness caught the attention of many.

However, the name change was not the only move undertaken by Biya during his first ten years as president. As Anthony Ndi (2016) has noted, many of the Anglophone region’s economic signposts, such as the Cameroon Bank, Powercam, West Cameroon Marketing Board, and the Limbe seaport, were either forced out of business through excessive centralization of everything in Francophone Cameroon or outrightly closed down. Anglophone nationalists vowed to challenge the destruction of their region’s economy.
The political liberation of the 1990s offered an opening. Protest activities began with *villes mortes* (ghost towns); other political parties were legalized; and movements and groups that challenged Biya’s policies emerged. For example, the teachers’ unions and trade unions began playing a more visible role. But the most significant development of the time was the formation of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), which arose as a major political party and, according to some observers, was the party that won the 1992 presidential election. The court gave the victory to Biya.

The following year, 1993, Anglophone nationalists organized the All Anglophone Conference I in Buea and, a year later, the All Anglophone Conference II in Bamenda. These two conferences produced the Buea Declaration and the Bamenda Proclamation respectively. In addition to listing how Anglophone Cameroon had been mistreated and discriminated against, the Bamenda Declaration called for zero-option (secession) if federalism was not restored within a reasonable time. To counter this request for a return to federalism, Biya signed a decentralization decree—a decree that to this day remains elusive at the implementation level. Created in 1995 was the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), a pro-secession organization that supported zero-option. However, the generation that produced the document did not provide a roadmap for achieving secession—a weakness that became a glaring one during the current conflict. Few anticipated the destructive nature that has characterized the conflict.

**Road to the October 2016 Crisis and the Urgency of the Moment**

Clearly, the sources of Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis are deeply rooted in the region’s history, so the more recent strikes by lawyers and teachers should be seen as a continuation of an expression of Anglophone nationalism designed to improve the economic and social conditions of the people in the region. In October 2016, the Anglophone Common Lawyers Association
called for the Biya government to respond to two memoranda the association had sent to the president and his prime minister, dated May 9, 2015, and February 13, 2016. The memoranda resulted from a series of meetings and a general dissatisfaction with what the lawyers referred to as a “deliberate and well-planned programme of whittling away and replacing the Common-Law rules of Criminal, Civil procedure, and of evidence, with a system and culture of French-inspired or copied Civil Law.” They requested the “restoration of Common Law-inspired Rules of practice and procedures” in the Anglophone regions (Mbunwe and Mbuwil October 3, 2016; Ngoh 2019, 389). In the memoranda, the lawyers asked the Biya government to “redistribute All Civil Law magistrates from the Northwest and Southwest Regions and in the same vein deploy All Common Law magistrates from civil law jurisdiction to the Common Law jurisdiction.” They also complained about the failure to translate *Organisation pour l’harmonisation en Afrique du droit des affaires* (OHADA) into English as an example of the government’s marginalization of English. Lawyers stated that they planned a strike for October 11–14 because the government failed to address their grievances. But on the eve of the strike, on October 10, the government brought in the military, which harassed and attacked them (Adams and Bouddih, October 11, 2016; Mbunwe and Mbuwil, October 3, 2016, and November 25, 2016; Mughe, November 24, 2016). The local population shuddered at the response from the government.

Soon after that, teachers also voted to go on strike. They too had registered similar grievances, blasting a system that they insisted consistently undermined the Anglophone educational institutions. The teachers’ organizations, including Teachers Association of Cameroon (TAC) and Cameroon Teachers Trade Union (CATTU), agreed to support the lawyers’ strike. In declaring this support for the lawyers’ strike, Wilfred Tassang, national executive secretary of CATTU, raised the stakes when he noted that the struggle was much more
than a request for fair wages and improved living conditions—it was an “Anglophone struggle.” He added, “This is time for us to rise up as one” (Fokwen 2017; Mbipgo, December 30, 2016; Mbunwe, June 30, 2017; Ngoh 2019, 390). The government’s response to the teachers’ strike mirrored the government’s response to the lawyers’ strike: arrests, threats, and intimidation. Of course, as a result of the strike, schools were closed, and courts remained empty. Students did not finish the first term of the 2016–17 academic year. To more effectively coordinate their efforts, lawyers and teachers formed the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) on December 6, 2016, and they made Nkongho Felix Agbor Balla president, while Fontem Aforteka Neba became the secretary general. The organization emerged as a result of government failure to respond to the demands of the lawyers and the teachers. Initially, it called for an end to marginalization and negotiation, but with continuous government violence, the demands quickly moved to a call for the return to federalism.

But government response to the protest was a miscalculation. Rather than keeping the strikers divided, its response forced lawyers and teachers to act in unison for a common purpose. They began to coordinate strategies and to share information. As a result, the movement gained momentum in urban and rural areas of the region, thereby changing the dynamics of the protest (Mbunwe, November 28, 2016).

As if the Biya team did not have enough problems, less than a month after the lawyers and teachers joined forces, on November 28, students at the University of Buea went on strike. As had the lawyers and teachers, the students began their grievances with a request to improve conditions on campus, then quickly turned to other matters. They resented, for example, that the 50,000 francs CFA (Central African francs) Presidential Excellence Award had not been distributed to deserving students and protested the charge of 10,000 francs CFA levied on
students for late tuition payment (Abah and Nsoseka, December 02, 2016; Cameroon Postline, November 28, 2016; Mughe, November 29, 2016). They also argued that the policies of then-Vice Chancellor Nalova Lyonga were detrimental to the university. During the strike, Lyonga invited onto campus the military, which brutalized, raped, and tortured students and dragged them to jail (Scholars at Risk Network, November 28, 2016).

But the harsh military response backfired. These university students were part of a new generation. They had grown up with android phones and had regularly turned to Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and so on, and they had the capacity to reach thousands of people either with their phones or with the click of a mouse on their computers. The nature of protest activities in the twenty-first century saw drastic change, evident in these students and their situation: intense youth activism, social media, improvement in communication and transport, the resilience of the people, and their determination. Among the most defining events of the protest were images of university students being beaten, dragged in mud, handcuffed, chained on seats in military vehicles, and hauled off to jail (CMTV Online, November 28, 2016). These images galvanized youths all over the region. These photos and videos turned out to be a game-changer for many. Students supported the no-school strike, and classes at the University of Buea were canceled.

For whatever reason, the Biya team had either underestimated the protest or planned to rely solely on military response without paying attention to these very different times. Whatever the thinking, as events later showed, it turned out to be a miscalculation of immense proportion. It was no longer the 1990s. The government underestimated the power of social media to inform, educate, and mobilize the population, especially those at the grassroots level. It underestimated the power of social media to be used to blur the lines between fact and “fake news,” propaganda,
and outright lies. Even though the Biya team also used social media, it never had a rapid-response team for what it termed “fake news” or other forms of information. Social media combined with the harsh military response likely did more to garner support for the strike than any one person could have done (Nsoseka, November 14, 2016). Indeed, the government grossly underestimated the power of social media.

Biya and the military should have known better. Traditionally, attacks on peaceful demonstrators had often backfired, and Cameroon was no exception. Those attacks on supporters of the strike were carried on social media, thereby magnifying the crisis. Okada boys, taxi drivers, farmers, unemployed persons, and many others came out in support of the teachers and lawyers (Mbunwe, December 5, 2016; Mughe, November 29, 2016). “You cannot kill an idea with military weapons,” a respondent wrote in a questionnaire, reflecting the opinion of many others. Repeatedly, respondents scorned what they labeled as a “military occupation” of the Anglophone regions. Interviewees stated that it was a protest against “colonial oppression,” “marginalization,” “exploitation,” “government corruption,” “military brutality,” “dominance of the French language,” “economic injustice,” “discrimination,” “maltreatment,” “unemployment,” “second-class citizenship,” “poverty,” “unjust educational and legal system,” and “Biya’s nearly forty years reign” (compiled from responses to questionnaires completed by Anglophones).

Even Francophones who traditionally dismissed Anglophones as “Anglo-fou” and “Biafrans” questioned the government’s heavy-handed response to what they considered “legitimate” demands, as shown in the following responses to questionnaires:

*D’après moi, les anglophones au début, revendiquaient l’égalité des droits entre les deux langues nationales du Cameroun qui sont l’Anglais et le Français. Ils voulaient être traits de la même façon que les Francophones sur le plan politique.*
professionnel et social. [According to me, Anglophones requested, from the beginning, that the two national languages, English and French, be treated equally. They demanded equality with Francophones in political, professional and social dimensions.]

Ceux de la crise du mal-être social politique et économique de la sciente Camerounaise. [This is the crisis of social, political, and economic malaise of the Cameroonian society.]

Ce pour moi nous avons: la marginalisation, la mauvaise gestion du pays, la non-governance. [According to me we have: marginalization, mismanagement of the country, and weak political institutions.]

La première cause est la revendication des avocats anglophones qui insurgent contre les dysfonctionnements sous le sous-système judiciaire anglophone, le prendre revendication poite sur l’inexistence de la version anglaise au Cameroun des actes OHADA. Ils contestent également l’application du code civil francophone dans la justification des régions du sud-ouest et nord-ouest. Nous avons également la evendicatrons des enseignants du sous-système anglophone qui dénoncent l’absorption de leur sous-système par les francophones. [From the beginning, Anglophone lawyers protested the demotion of the Common Law or the English judicial system in the country. They also protested that Cameroon OHADA business law had not been translated into English. They decried the excessive use of the French civil code in the southwest and northwest regions.]
They also protested the increasing use of Francophone teachers in Anglophone schools.]

Les trois principaux causes des problèmes anglophones sont l’arrestation des avocats qui avaient voulu organiser une grève stipulant au gouvernement d’arrêter d’envoyer des avocats francophones dans les tribunaux anglophones, la mort de 17 personnes suite à cette grève de 2016 par ces avocats anglophones et enseignants; enfin la révolte des populations anglophones face aux multiples jamais résolus dont ils font face et donc ils parlent de discrimination linguistique. [The three main causes of the anglophone problems are: the arrest of lawyers who protested the use of Francophone judges in courts in the Anglophone region; the death of seventeen people during the lawyers and teachers strike of 2016; and finally Anglophones protested the many unresolved discriminatory practices especially in the area of language.]

Je pense que les problèmes anglophones préposent sur: la marginalisation des minorités, la culture non reconnue, l’économie dans la distribution des ressources, la non-participation au prévoir politiques. [I think that the Anglophone Crisis resulted from: marginalization of minorities, disrespect of Anglophone cultural heritage, inequitable distribution of the nation’s resources, and the failure to give Anglophones real political power.]

Nous avons d’abord l’hypercentralisation de l’état qui Fail en sorte que les populations ne participant pas réellement a légertion des affaires publiques. Nous avons ensuite la paupérisation des populations qui vivent dans une misère et
pauvreté extrême et qui au fur des jours assiste à la dégradation de leurs conditions de vie. Enfin nous avons l’inégalité dans la distribution des richesses entre les couches sociales différentes existait dans ces zones du Cameroun. Telles sont selon nous quelques causes problème Anglophone. [We have, first of all, a very centralized and exclusive governmental system resulting in little or no participation from the people. For a long time, the people have been living in misery, and nothing was done to correct the situation. There is a feeling of destitution. Finally, the excessive greed and unequal distribution of wealth in the country gave birth to the Anglophone Crisis.]

Another Francophone, David Abouem a Tchoyi, who previously held several positions in Biya’s government, likened the Anglophone Crisis to an emerging Boko Haram in the region, arguing the Anglophone Crisis resulted from six sources: failure of the centralized government system in the country, failure to implement promises made during the 1961 referendum, failure to implement the Foumban agreement, failure to place English at the same level as the French language, failure to promote Anglophone legal and educational institutions, and changing the name of the country from “federal” to “united” and to “republic” without consultation with Anglophones (Kamé 2018, 95–96). Tchoyi warned that the Anglophone Crisis could not be resolved without addressing those issues (2017). His argument and the responses to questionnaires show that Francophones agreed that Anglophones had legitimate reasons to strike.

Failures by the Biya government to address concerns of protesters accelerated grassroots mobilization. This miscalculation turned out to be perhaps a key turning point in the protest. Historical precedents point to the effectiveness of the role of the masses in bringing about change. In the French Revolution, the storming of the Bastille changed the direction of things. In
Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah turned to the masses to defeat British imperialism, and in India, Mahatma Gandhi did the same. In Kenya, the Mau-Mau uprising was shaped by peasants, and in the United States, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. built a civil rights movement around the masses. The masses dismantled South Africa’s Apartheid. As Fanon rightly stated, the masses generally do not give up (1963).

With schools closed and the judicial system crippled in the Anglophone regions, the government began to take the protest seriously. Meetings between Prime Minister Philemon Yang and Paul Ghogomu Mingo, director of the prime minister’s cabinet, produced no tangible results (Mbunwe, December 16, 2016). Prior to those meetings, the government had addressed some of the concerns raised by teachers and lawyers. For instance, there had already been an announcement to recruit one thousand teachers, an approval to set aside two billion francs to assist non-public schools, and an agreement to transfer Francophone teachers from Anglophone schools. Of those arrested, twenty-one of the eighty-two had been released (Kamé 2018, 101). But that was not enough. On December 27, Agbor Balla warned: “We are calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all those kidnapped and transferred to Yaoundé! Without that, no dialogue can take place” (Azohnwi, January 9, 2017). Strike leaders acted on their threats. They called for the enforcement of “ghost town” for January 9, 2017, the day schools were to resume for the second term. Each side watched and waited for a breakthrough.

Furious at the slow pace of things, the government acted. Government representatives likened strike leaders to “terrorists” intent on hijacking the academic future of young people. From there, things unraveled quickly (Ful, 2016). When strike leaders attempted to introduce on the agenda a discussion on the form of government, the government hit back, asking them to focus on the reasons they gave for the strike. “Of all the pertinent issues we discussed, we
discovered that federalism is a taboo to this government,” said Harmony Bobga Mbuton, president of the Northwest Lawyers’ Association (Cameroon Report, May 8–10, 2017; Fokwen, November 28, 2016; January 9, 2017). Yet by walking away from the table, especially so close to the resumption of the new school term, both sides miscalculated. Once schools were closed, and as egos crept into the negotiation—combined with intense suspicion of each other—it became clear they would be locked in a collision course for a long time. And that is what happened.

Schools in the Anglophone region did not resume at the beginning of the second term, thereby making education a major casualty of the strike (Adams November 18, 2016; Mughe, January 10, 2017; Sa’ah 2018). Those interviewed stated that the social consequences of this no-school policy for young people would probably not be known until years later. A resident of Buea noted, “Our children; the future of our country no longer goes to school. They are growing up illiterate. Think about that” (Edimensumbe, correspondence with the author, 2018). That said it all.

As both sides dug in, the Biya team went on the offensive. Paul Atanga Nji, then minister in charge of special duties at the presidency, rejected the notion of the Anglophone Crisis: “I can say straight away that there is no Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon and those who talk about it, I can say that they are imposters who are in search of notoriety.” He added, “Anglophones are not marginalized in Cameroon” (Kamé 2018, 88). Still more from him: “How can you be talking about marginalization when for the past 25 years all prime ministers of Cameroon have been Anglophones” (Ayang 2016, 3; The Horizon, June 12, 2018). Then, because Biya occasionally spoke English, he continued, Biya could not be anti-Anglophone. In short, Atanga Nji’s position was simple: The problems in the Anglophone regions were fomented by outside forces. He
warned the strikers to either return home or face the wrath of the law. Few statements fueled more anger among Anglophones than Atanga Nji’s. As a cabinet minister from Akum in Bamenda in the Anglophone region, he had touched a raw nerve by agreeing with Francophone government elites that the notion of an Anglophone Crisis was a fraud invented by a minority of the population. Responses to questionnaires labeled him “Judas,” “traitor,” “curse,” and an “embarrassment” to Anglophones. He was, an interviewee stated, the epitome of the reasons Anglophones should not trust “elites.”

Next in line was Communication Minister Issa Tchiroma Bakary, who also denied the existence of the Anglophone Crisis. Like Atanga Nji, he declared that the teachers and lawyers were being exploited by outside forces intent on destabilizing the nation (Kinsai and Mengnjo, November 18, 2016). He was among the first regime spokespersons to publicly label protesters as “terrorist,” and as responses to questionnaires made clear, Anglophones never forgave him for that. He was Biya’s chief propagandist, an interviewee stated. Minister of Justice and Keeper of the Seals Laurent Esso also weighed in. At a meeting in Yaoundé, he ordered the lawyers to return to work and obey the law (Editorial, November 25, 2016; Pefok, November 11, 2016). The meeting, the lawyers later stated, was a waste of time, and they confirmed that the Biya team was more interested in games than in looking for solutions (Mughe, November 24, 2016). The strike went on.

Government failure to take the strike more seriously was alarming. Though the list of grievances provided by the teachers’ unions and Common Law lawyers did not specifically request a return to federalism, statements made by leaders were revealing. On the eve of the new term, Tassang warned, “We will know whether Yaoundé controls Anglophone Cameroon or we control our country. After Monday, we will think of what to do to put the government crawling
on its knees” (Azohnwi, January 9, 2017). Attempts to reach a truce deadlocked. As the no-school policy was enforced in the Anglophone region, those with means relocated their children to Francophone Cameroon to attend school. “It is very expensive, but I had to take my three children and send to Yaoundé to go to school,” a resident of Kumba stated. With a no-school policy in one region, Cameroon quickly became “two separate nations in one.” The major losers quickly became the poor. On Monday, January 9, 2017, as children in the Francophone region returned to school, those in the Anglophone region stayed home. It was the first stoppage of its kind in the nation’s history. With this, both the government and the leadership of the CACSC became accessories to the destruction of the educational future of the region’s youth.

A week after the beginning of the second term, the government had had enough. On January 17, 2017, the minister of territorial administration and decentralization, René Emmanuel Sadi, signed a decree banning CACSC and SCNC, and soon after that, Agbor Balla, Fontem Neba, and others were arrested and sent to the nation’s notorious Kondegui Prison in Yaoundé. Wilfred Tassang slipped out of the country and avoided arrest at that time, but Tassang was among those picked up in Abuja with the Ambazonia president. Mancho Bibixy, a popular radio announcer who gained notoriety after he carried a coffin to the protest to announce his willingness to die for the cause, was arrested on January 20 (Atabong 2017; Kamé 2018, 97–98). Those arrests turned out to be another major miscalculation. The government, a respondent wrote, “made a huge blunder by arresting Anglophone representatives who wanted a peaceful resolution of the crisis, hence … opening the way for more violent representatives.” Another added that the administration’s tactics were misguided because “a political problem cannot be solved by using military operations.” With the leadership in jail, the voices of peaceful negotiators were pushed out. It was a “terrible mishap,” an observer argued, adding it “gave way
for leadership of the struggle to be handed to those in the Diaspora who wanted nothing short of secession” (Nsoseka, April 10, 2017).

During the period when Balla and his colleagues were detained, little happened. Rather, the government continued to go after protesters, and the situation deteriorated. Schools remained closed, and even the few schools that opened their doors experienced enormous absences, threats, and kidnap (BBC News, February 18, 2019). Parents were hesitant to send children to school for fear of what might happen. What follows is a description of the circumstances faced by a teacher who escaped and became an IDP in Douala:

One lady, in her late twenties, and a former high school teacher in Bamenda, noted a member of the Ambazonia “boys” came to her class disguised as one of the students. He wore the school uniform and sat quietly in the back. At the end of the class the student approached her with a warning: “Why are you coming to school? You must obey our orders. I know you. … I know where you live. … This is the only warning you will get.” It was nerve-racking, she said, more especially as some of her colleagues had already been tortured. For a moment she considered escaping into the bush but decided to get out of the region. “Those boys do not joke,” she said. She packed-up a few belongings, left her child with family, and headed to Douala. She imagined it would be a temporary move but already in her second year in town, she has doubts about returning to Bamenda (Amin, July 17, 2019).

The consequences of the no-school policy were devastating. In Kumba, young people gallivanted through the streets. As the rate of juvenile delinquency went up, so did the rate of teenage pregnancy. A woman lamented when she discovered that her three daughters in Form 5,
lower six, and upper six were all pregnant. Their situation was not unique. At the Kumba District Hospital, medical officials complained of the large number of young girls who came in for pre-natal care (Interviews conducted in Cameroon). The International Crisis Group, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and others complained of the rise in sexual violence and drug use by young people. There was hunger and pain (Human Rights Watch, July 19, 2018; Kumonu December 2018-March 2019). The responses to questionnaires revealed an overwhelming concern about the negative impact of the crisis on the region’s youth. A respondent wrote: “Many of these kids have stopped their education especially those whose parents are not financially viable. Many ladies especially in rural areas are becoming premature mothers while boys become thieves, fighters. … These kids now bear a foundation of anger, war, misconduct, etc.” Vices including “drugs,” “petit theft,” “arm robbery,” “common crime,” “scamming,” “baby mothers,” “physical and psychological trauma,” “school dropouts,” “gangsterism,” “rebels,” “rape,” “killings,” “prostitution,” and “illiteracy” were normalized among youths. One descriptive term—“diabolic”—carried an unforgettable tinge (responses to questionnaires). With schools closed, youths became easy targets either for Ambazonian recruiters or killings by government forces; parents lamented the unenviable position into which the conflict put their children (responses to questionnaires). Government forces proceeded with more atrocities. The Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa wrote that, as of May 2019, 206 communities had been burned in the southwest and northwest regions (2019, June 3, 2019). In fact, parts of the Anglophone region were literally dying (Nkong, May 7, 2018).

By the middle of 2017, Biya had lost the opportunity to provide quick fixes to the problems as the protest gained increasing national and international attention. The international community began to pay attention (Human Rights Watch, July 19, 2018; International Crisis
Group, August 2, 2017; MacAlister 2021; MaClean 2018, Searcey 2018; Morse 2017; Tinsley 2019). The crisis also attracted attention from the major powers, including the United States, Britain, France, and Canada (Roberst and Burton 2020). Cameroon was fast becoming a pariah among the nations. Universities suspended their study-abroad programs in Cameroon. Tourism dropped. The Buea Mountain Race, a fixture of excitement, took place only under heavy security (Mbonwoh 2018). The African Cup of Nations (AFCON) dropped Cameroon as the host of the games. Terror, fear, and insecurity pervaded the Anglophone region. As Biya’s military intensified its activities against protesters, the separatist forces grew relentless in their tactics of hit and run, kidnap, and terror of the local population (MaClean 2018).

In November 2017, six military officers were killed in Mamfe. Biya’s reaction was swift. During the prior months he had said little in public about the protest. He used this incident to declare his anti-Ambazonia policy, a policy of his government to pursue those he termed as “secessionists.” Returning from Côte d’Ivoire, where he had attended the fifth African Union-European Summit, he announced the policy at Nsimalen International Airport in Yaoundé. Cameroon, he announced, was a “victim to repeated terrorist attacks from secessionist groups,” and he vowed to “eliminate these criminals.” Those are “terrorists masquerading as secessionists,” he fumed. He ordered his armed forces to hunt down Ambazonia forces and their sympathizers (Ateba, December 1, 2017). In the Anglophone region, Biya’s message was interpreted as a formal declaration of war against the region, and nationalists vowed to defend the territory. Biya’s approach, respondents to questionnaires noted, was ill-informed and misguided. Rather than pursue avenues for dialogue, interviewees stated, Biya’s actions exposed his disdain for Anglophones. “Biya has never respected Anglophones,” one wrote. The war
declaration hardened the position of separatists, prolonged the conflict, and contributed to more bloodshed and destruction of property (Responses to questionnaires).

Biya’s new offensive intensified the war. On January 5, 2018, Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe and the other leaders of the Ambazonia movement were arrested in Abuja, Nigeria, and sent to Nkondengui, Yaoundé, where they were detained and later sentenced to life imprisonment (BBC News, August 20, 2019; MaClean 2019). Their arrest led to more attacks as Anglophone groups made efforts to make them the face of Biya’s marginalization of the region. After their arrests, an important rally cry in the Anglophone region became, “Free our leaders.” Attacks on and burnings of communities believed to harbor suspected Ambazonia fighters intensified. Since Biya’s offensive began, over fifty communities had been burned, including Mbalangi, Kembong, Kwakwa, Boa Bakundu, Ekombe, Etam, and Kombine Mission (Tembon 2018). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) made documentaries of the burnings and the massive torture that charaterized the protest (BBC News, 2018). As the fighting intensified, so did the terror on the lives of locals.

By the summer of 2018, the protest was in its most violent phase. Government military forces and the Ambazonia Defense Force were locked in a deadly embrace, and neither side was willing to blink. Stories of repeated killings, kidnap, and torture dominated the news. A man in his twenties offered his reaction in an interview: “How man fit sleep for night? … Man dey get bad dream … all these die body … these people soso shoot, shoot. [How can one fall asleep? … One has nightmares … too many dead bodies … and all the continuous gunshots].” Another who escaped from Mbalangi to Douala promised never to return to his community. He was terrifiied by gunshots, corpses lying around, and the burnings (Interviews conducted in Cameroon). His
comments echoed those of many in rural communities whom the conflict had displaced. Parts of Cameroon’s Anglophone region had turned into an inferno.

**Erosion of a way of Life**

Responses to questionnaires overwhelmingly stated that the conflict had eroded major aspects of the region’s lifestyle and culture. Things that people previously took for granted had become impossible to do. “A stroll to an off-license [bar] in the evening with a friend for a beer is no longer possible,” an interviewee in Bamenda noted. The economy of the Anglophone region was shattered. Businesses, shops, enterprises, and markets were either closed or functioned sporadically. In observance of the “ghost town” strike, mandated closures took place every Monday for more than three years, resulting in widespread hunger. Farmers abandoned farms for fear of attacks by either government or separatist forces. Major business owners previously based in Kumba and other towns in the region relocated to Douala (MacAllister 2021). Closed were the hotels, bars, restaurants, and other forms of businesses that catered to people in the evenings. Inter-city transportation was reduced to a bare minimum, and when vehicles moved from one city to the other, they traveled in convoys. In several cases, they were escorted by military vehicles (Amin 2018).

Economic losses compounded. Cameroonians who went home for holidays and other festivities no longer did so. Their spending typically stimulated the economy, especially in businesses such as hotels whose profitability depended on catering to “bush fallers” who returned to Cameroon especially on holidays such as Christmas. The economic ruin was particularly profound at the region’s main agribusiness facility, the Cameroon Development Corporation, the heart of the region’s economy. Plantations that produced palm oil were no longer operational. Workers at banana plantations were brutalized, and rubber processors were repeatedly attacked. Families that depended on cocoa for their livelihood faced destitution. In
June 2019, Christopher Ngalla, one of the managers at the CDC Plantations, reported that the company had lost 32 billion francs CFA during the first part of the year and that more losses were ahead (Mbodiam 2019).

Traditional practices eroded as well. Villages stopped “cry-die” celebrations, an important ritual that celebrated the life of those who transitioned into ancestors. It was too unsafe for such gatherings, traditional leaders stated. Many communities, including Lewoh in Lebialem Division, turned into no-go areas. The unrest also prompted other cultural changes. Irrespective of where people resided, Cameroonians had typically preferred their burial sites to be in their villages of origin. Not anymore. Increasingly, people chose to be buried anywhere possible (Nchinda 2018). Even SAGI, a Cameroonian-run insurance company created to transfer remains from the US back to Cameroon reversed its previous policy from nonpayment of those who elected to be buried outside of Cameroon to payment. Because of insecurity, an increasing number of Cameroonians elected for their remains not to be transported to Cameroon (SAGI 2018).

Traditional rulers, known for the role they played in things such as conflict resolution and preservation of the people’s culture, escaped from their communities, and in many cases, their residences were vandalized by pro-separatist fighters. Some rulers were kidnapped (Daily News Cameroon, July 18, 2018). Terror was everywhere. A resident of Buea who had initially supported the protest stated, “We have suffered long enough. … Amba should leave us alone.” That was not a unique situation. By mid-2018, similar stories were repeatedly told (Interviews conducted in Cameroon).

The list of hardships was long. School buildings remained empty. Refugees and internally displaced people were nowhere close to returning to their homes. In communities in Anglophone
Cameroon, basic services such as trash collection no longer existed. Trash piled up in cities, and corpses were routinely seen on roadsides. The moral fabric of the community broke down. The authority of trusted institutions such as the family, church, traditional meeting groups, and schools, which historically maintained and provided guidance to society’s values, eroded (Interviews conducted in Cameroon).

Despite the impact of the protest on the people’s culture, locals did not waver in the reasons they supported the protest. They were knowledgeable about the resources that came from the region. The region produced cocoa, rubber, timber, and coffee, and it had oil. Yet little of the revenue was returned to the region for development. A respondent wrote: “I will conclude by saying that Anglophones have been abandoned in terms of infrastructural development, road construction, social balance, and many others. With all these, they had the right to react, but the incompetent and self-centered government ignored our grievances and instead sent us troops to molest and kill us. The government of Cameroon has failed drastically.” This feeling was reflected in roughly 8 percent of responses to questionnaires and oral interviews. The Anglophone Crisis, irrespective of how it was framed, turned out to be a struggle over basic needs. When ordinary people spoke of marginalization, their reference point was economic, not high ministerial positions and directorship positions. Marginalization translated into economic exclusion, and the violence that resulted contributed to an erosion of the way of life in the region.

**Social Media: A Game-Changer**

Social media transformed the nature of protest activities in the twenty-first century. In 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a petit trader in Tunisia, set himself on fire to protest economic hardships placed on him and others by Tunisian political leaders. His action sparked the Arab Spring, an internet phenomenon. Increasingly, social media has become an important tool used by nationalists to chastise authoritarian regimes on the continent. Thus, several African nations,
including Ethiopia, Chad, Algeria, and Sudan, have already disconnected internet services at different points to counteract social media’s power.

So, the use of social media to inform others about the crisis in Cameroon was not unique. From the beginning, lawyers boasted that they used social media to achieve many of their early objectives: “We have sensitized ourselves significantly enough on our Facebook WhatsApp group exchanges and at our monthly gatherings. So, we are more than ripe to stand on our own. Belonging to a Bar Council where our interests is not protected is rubbish” (Mbunwe and Adams October 14, 2016). Lawyers used this outlet to educate, inform, and mobilize locals to support their cause (Pommerolle and Heungoup 2017, 530). As the demonstration turned violent, images of beatings, burning buildings, and use of tear gas were posted online.4

By January 17, 2017, the Biya regime, having had enough of that, proceeded to interrupt internet services in the Anglophone regions (Cameroon Report, May 8–10, 2017). Eden newspaper reported at the time that Chief Senator Tabetando bragged at the Southwest Elite Forum on February 2 that he requested internet services be disconnected in the Southwest Region because it had been used to spread all types of rumors and misinformation (Cham, 6 February 2017). Bouopda Pierre Kamé stated that internet service was disconnected to disrupt foreign influence on events in Cameroon. Cameroonians in the diaspora, he noted, used the internet to spread false information in the hopes of destabilizing the nation and used it to wire money to fund the “criminal activities of their accomplices based in Cameroon” (2018, 98). The government argued there was evidence that money came “from abroad to incite disorder and fund calls for federalism and secession” (Atangana 2017; Kamé 2018, 85). But the government also used social media to counter those stories, arguing that its goal was to restore peace and stability and to stop the misinformation spread by those in the diaspora. Biya used Facebook to
promote the government’s anti-protest position. Realizing that separatists were winning in the propaganda war, the government acted while blaming the other side. Irrespective of the reasons brought forward for disconnecting internet services, the action backfired. And as George Ogola has argued, internet shutdown encouraged the proliferation of those “rumors” that governments sought to squash by shutting internet services to begin with (2019).

Government action was a desperate attempt to control information about the protest. Cameroonians who lived in the city of Tiko basically took the thirty-minute Okada or taxi ride across the River Mungo so that they could use internet services in Douala. The action played into the hands of those in the diaspora. They pointed to atrocities committed by the military in rural communities, raised money, published fiery articles to online groups, created pro-Ambazonia websites, and regularly issued dicta against the Biya government. Cameroonians turned to Twitter and Facebook and reached more people. Videos of refugees living in makeshift homes in refugee camps across the borders in Nigeria and eking a living from bare necessities, as well as videos of women’s stories about their lives in bushes, spread rapidly. These videos imploded government statements about managing the crisis, intensifying calls to Biya from the global community to stop the mayhem in his country. Julius T. Nganji and Lynn Cockburn have written that the most common hashtags of the Anglophone Crisis included “#BringBackOurInternet, #FreeAllArrested and #Ambazonia” (2019). Such major media outlets as The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Conversation, BBC, and The Guardian increasingly exposed the brutality of the conflict. Some likened the situation to the Rwandan genocide, challenging major powers to do something (MaClean 2018; Morse 2017; Searcey 2018; Taoua 2018; Tinsley 2019). Many in the diaspora organized protest activities wherever the Cameroonian leader
visited, especially at the InterContinental Hotel in Geneva, where he spent a significant amount of time (*Ilwareed Online*, July 4, 2019).

Cameroonian in the diaspora led the anti-Biya campaign on social media while mandating the local population in Cameroon to enforce “ghost town.” However, when those pronouncements escalated into tacit endorsement of kidcaps, decapitations, and other outright brutalities against those who disobeyed, previous supporters of the protest became critical of the role of those in the diaspora. Interviews and responses to questionnaires showed mixed reactions toward them. Though many of those in the diaspora were praised for “speaking up” and for exposing the problems of the Anglophone regions, interviewees were also critical of what they referred to as the “hypocrisy” and “deceitful ways” of the diaspora population. They accused pro-Ambazonian Cameroonians in the diaspora of “manipulation” and of using the crisis “to seek asylum for friends and relatives.” A recurring criticism was how Cameroonians living in the diaspora could oppose the reopening of schools in the country but celebrate graduations of their friends and family on Facebook. Others challenged diaspora Cameroonians that one way to show their support was for them to quit their jobs and withdraw their children from school, just as was taking place in the region. In fact, by the end of the second year of the protest, locals had increasingly become critical of self-proclaimed leaders in the diaspora. Below is a sample of responses reflecting general opinions against pro-Ambazoria Anglophones in the diaspora:

I think they are cowards forcing people in the country to fight when they are safe in their home and their children are in school. Let them come to Ambazoria and back their words with their actions.
My message to those who are out there posting things is that they should not only stay out there and give instruction, they should come and fight the fight with us here.

They are not Cameroonians because a true Cameroonian defends his country in his territory. They encourage the crisis whereas their children are comfortable schooling, so that when the most educated Cameroonian had been killed innocently, they should come back and take their position.

Stop shouting from a telephone. We appreciate your efforts, but the fight is here in Cameroon. (Response to questionnaires)

Of course, similar criticisms came from Francophone Cameroonians. At the onset of the crisis, they expressed reservation over government response, but by September 2018, they had grown critical of the damage caused in the Anglophone regions by the “Amba” fighters. Below is another sample of opinions expressed in response to questionnaires:

La situation générale est plutôt alarmante. Les anglophones de souches vivent dans l’angoisse et la peur. Ils n’ont plus de vie, le Nord-Ouest et le Sud-Ouest sont devenus des villes mortes. La vie n’est qu’une image incolore. Les anglophones vivent une vie de misère, de famine, certains ont fui. Il est également vrai que les meurtres et les enlèvements observés sur les réseaux sociaux et à la télévision sont comme des films d’horreur qui peuvent laisser tout le monde dans un traumatisme. À Yaoundé, vous ne pouvez pas ressentir ce qu’ils ressentent.

[The situation is alarming. Anglophones live in anguish and fear. The northwest and southwest regions are literally dying. Life is stagnant. In those regions, there
is misery, starvation, and many people have emigrated from the region. The repeated murders and kidnappings shown on social media and TV have turned the place into the type of things seen in horror movies. It is difficult to understand that life from living in Yaoundé.]

Le Cameroun anglophone aujourd’hui s’effondre dans l’ombre. Les enfants ne vont plus à l’école, les hôpitaux et ceux qui y travaillent ne sont plus en sécurité. En bref, Bamenda et Buea se sont transformés en un cimetière où nous enterrons chaque jour sans au revoir. Les frères sont devenus des hommes mangeurs (cannibalisme), les événements sont si désastreux, effrayants et très tristes. [Anglophone Cameroon is imploding. Nothing is working: Children no longer go to school, and there is no safety for employees at the hospital and other places. Anglophone cities of Bamenda and Buea have become a graveyard where many are buried without a funeral. The young men have become cannibals. The situation is both frightful and tragic.]

In addition to disconnecting internet services, the government erred by failing to accept the Catholic Church’s offer to mediate the crisis. Church groups played a vital role in education in Anglophone Cameroon, especially at the primary and secondary levels. The strike, bishops wrote, had a devastating impact on their ability to deliver education to the community, and they requested to meet with government representatives to find solutions. The government refused the church’s offer to assist in solving the problems (Kuwonu 2018 - 2019; US Department of State 2019). Instead, the government took church groups to court for failing to open schools (Pefok, April 21, 2017).
Voices of Protest and Anger

At an Anglophone Restaurant in Biyemassi, Yaoundé, crowds that poured in and ate traditional Cameroonian food willingly expressed opinions on the origins and potential solutions of the crisis. While they vehemently condemned what they described as “la République’s military occupation” of Anglophone Cameroon, they decried the culture of kidnappings and brutality that had become normalized in the Anglophone territory: “Why would they attack people and claim the revolution is to help them?” some asked. “What had been created in the region was fear … people obeyed ‘country-Sunday’ [“ghost town”] not because they support the protest but because they fear their stores would be burnt,” a resident of Buea informed the author. Another added:

We have destroyed our best enterprises CDC, PAMOL, the cocoa industry, our budding workforce, ruined our breadbasket that feeds the nation by burning our villages where food comes from, kidnapped our people to extort money from an already impoverished populace more than any roadside policeman could ever manage to extort from us in our entire lifetimes, shed more blood of our fellow citizens—with Anglophones bearing the brunt of the assault—that left our streets running crimson with the blood of our fallen brethren and sistren and our homes pockmarked with bullets.

Those who gathered at the restaurant were overwhelmingly critical of Biya’s failure to go on television and address the crisis when it started. “Cameroonian are a peaceful people and do not like war,” a customer at the restaurant stated, noting that the problem would have been resolved without bloodshed had the president just done his job. Another concurred in a response to a questionnaire:
To his excellency, the president of Cameroon Paul Biya, please daddy

Anglophones are suffering and dying every day. You alone can stop this crisis.

Listen to your children complains and give solutions. Talk directly to the two regions because we do no longer have confidence in the Anglophone elites.

During the crisis many in the northwest and southwest regions did not disguise their impatience with Anglophone elites. They labeled elites as “greedy,” “frauds,” “sell-outs,” and “liars” who cared only about their “stomachs.” Some even blamed them for the escalation of the crisis. They blamed the continuing crisis on elites: “The administration is failing every day because they keep sending elites in which we no longer trust to talk to us.” Another wrote, “It will not work because they are liars” (Responses to questionnaires). Traditionally, locals questioned the role of Anglophone elites in the struggle for justice arguing that they had consistently betrayed the aspirations of the people in the region ( Fochingong 2005; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998).

On the topic of the form of the government, there was overwhelming support for a return to pre-1972 federalism. Responses to questionnaires repeatedly argued that federalism was the most viable solution to the current problems. According to them, the region’s economy flourished under the federal system, and they believed it would happen again. Repeatedly, responses to questionnaires overwhelmingly called for “inclusive dialogue,” “genuine dialogue,” or “dialogue” to solve the problems. To them, dialogue translated to a restoration of federalism; the demilitarization of the Anglophone regions; economic justice; massive rebuilding of infrastructure and destroyed communities; creation of a constitution giving Anglophones equal rights; and genuine equality of Francophones and Anglophones. While they noted that the protest had produced worthy results, those were not enough. OHADA was translated into English; a
presidential decree on January 23, 2017, created the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism; and another order requested not only the creation of English law programs at the nation’s major universities, but also the creation of a faculty of law and political sciences at the University of Buea (Kamé 2018, 105; Kinsai 2017; Nsom, April 03, 2017).

On the topic of secession, a significant number of those interviewed and those who responded to questionnaires denied that secession was an original goal of the protest, arguing it came up as a result of the government’s failure to negotiate. Some noted that those living outside the country pushed the idea: “Look at them on YouTube—always shouting,” one stated (Responses to questionnaires). Another argued that “secession is a desperate attempt by people whose history is rife with war, and war has never solved any problem, and secession will certainly create more problems than it will solve” (Responses to questionnaires). The focus on secession angered respondents because it distracted from the problems that gave rise to the protest. Secession and the resulting violence, indeed, overshadowed the protest’s social justice causes. Francophone Cameroonians saw secession as a “utopia” that did not represent the aspiration of the Anglophones they knew (Responses to questionnaires).

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the various arguments for secession, blunders by the Biya team gave pro-secession people a larger platform. Failures to implement the decentralization decree signed into law over twenty-five years ago prompted frustration. At his inauguration to a seventh term, Biya announced that he would accelerate the process of decentralization, and two months later in another speech, he noted he would take affirmative action measures to fast-track decentralization. And again, when he spoke on the Anglophone Crisis on September 10, 2019, he promised to move quickly with decentralization. Yet delays
and shifting timetables to implement policies created distrust and an overall sense that he was not reliable. To some, the notion of decentralization had always been a farce designed to distract from Anglophones’ request for a return to federalism. Biya’s promises, they noted, meant nothing.

**Conclusions and Recommendations for Change**

The Anglophone Crisis reaffirmed that the Cameroon nation, sixty years after reunification, remains an “experiment.” In their responses to questionnaires, Cameroonianians on both sides of the River Mungo described the country as two nations with two separate cultures, unequal and hostile to each other. Even though Biya had repeatedly stated, “Cameroon will remain one and indivisible,” the evidence has pointed to the opposite. During his nearly forty years in power, his policies deepened the economic, cultural, and social divide in the country. Though Cameroon prides itself in being “Africa in miniature,” and though Biya has repeatedly argued that the nation’s diversity is at the foundation of its strength, the biggest challenge for Cameroon remains its multicultural and multilingual diversity—this despite the Anglophone Crisis presenting so many opportunities to create and implement policies reflecting the diverse nature of the country.

An early initiative two months after the start of the protest was the creation of the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, but that agency continues to languish in oblivion with little to show after three years in existence.

Quite alarming was the absence of a long-term vision to address the crucial issues that gave birth to the Anglophone Crisis. In his New Year address to the nation on December 31, 2019, Biya praised the National Assembly and the Senate for passing a bill that “provides for equal use of English and French” in the nation’s public institutions and for making strides to implement the decentralization decree signed into law decades ago. As has happened many times in the past, mechanisms to implement those laws were not put in place, and locals dismissed
them as the “same old delaying tactics.” In short, the nation’s political and economic institutions remain too weak and too corrupt to implement new policies. They must be promptly reformed and strengthened, and the judiciary must be empowered and given independence to operate without intervention from the presidency. Measures to restore a sense of accountability must be put in place and enforced. Months after the October 2019 National Dialogue conferred onto the Anglophone region the “special status” preference, little has changed in the region as critics likened the initiative to the familiar “empty promises” and “gradualism” that has never yielded measurable results.

The Anglophone Crisis offers other lessons. It demonstrates that the power to destroy is not the power to control. Despite the regime’s destruction of communities, Ambazonia fighters and supporters could not be subdued. Biya’s repeated references to the opposition as “terrorists” and “armed gangs” undermined efforts for initiatives to resolve the crisis. It was a blunder of the first magnitude, and the consequences of such mistakes were far-reaching. The government’s call for unconditional surrender prolonged the conflict and resulted in many more deaths. But lessons did emerge from the actions of the armed opposition. For all the failures of the Biya regime to address issues raised by the conflict, separatists failed to garner support from locals. In fact, their support base dwindled after they resorted to tactics of terror and fear. Locals were repulsed by violence, threats, and destruction committed by pro-Ambazonia fighters. Those actions made supporters and skeptics more critically examine the motives, vision, and ideology of separatists. Besides the message of secession, separatists could not articulate how the outcome of the conflict would benefit the ordinary Okada (taxi driver), farmer, homemaker, or school dropout, so many of them displaced as a result of the conflict.
The absence of inspired leadership in the opposition is notable. Unlike successful nationalist movements, separatists presented different advocates at different times, depending on the argument at hand. Self-proclaimed leaders emerged in rapid succession and set up online sites that threatened any dissent. Additional problems arose. Few people knew much about the nationalist struggles of Ayuk Tabe prior to his being named president of the virtual Ambazonia Republic, and as a result, many easily withdrew their support when separatists began to engage in gross human rights violations. Attempts by supporters to place Ayuk Tabe and others in the same league as Nelson Mandela, Samora Machel, Kwame Nkrumah, Steve Biko, Thomas Sankara, and Jomo Kenyatta were unconvincing and thus met with failure.

I argue that there must be a long-term solution to the Anglophone Crisis. Those at the grassroots level are focused on issues of bread and butter—of basic needs and of human dignity and respect. Several initiatives are promising on the political, diplomatic, and economic fronts. Efforts to fast-track decentralization are encouraging, but it must be accelerated. People must be made to believe in their government again. Rather than handing out mattresses, bottles of cooking oil, and a few cups of rice, the Biya government must engage in a massive rebuilding effort to provide housing for those whose communities were burned down. Those efforts will in turn provide jobs and put money in those communities. People are looking for work, not handouts. The regime must redouble efforts to eliminate corruption and bring to government people who can bring ideas that solve problems. The regime also might institute immediate relief and recovery programs, after which it must proceed to reform the system. There must be a massive effort to create employment, build the infrastructure, and provide incentives for companies to relocate from cities such as Douala, already too congested, to neighboring cities such as Tiko, Buea, Mutengene, and Limbe, which are less than an hour’s drive from Douala.
Immediate gestures of good faith could include work on the Limbe Seaport and on the Tiko Airport. Educational policies must stop treating Anglophones as passive observers in society. Young Cameroonians must see both Anglophone and Francophone residents at every level of government, on every rung of the business ladder, on every management position, at every school—even on every billboard advertisement. Only such a widespread and visible approach can convincingly challenge Cameroon’s chronic pattern of discrimination and exclusion.

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Author Biography

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Responses to Questionnaires and Interviews Conducted in Cameroon from 2017 to 2019.


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1 Petit traders engage in small trading in a variety of goods.
2 Interviewees responded to questions on what they considered to be the sources of the Anglophone Crisis, their understanding of what “marginalization” meant, how they thought the problem could be solved, their perceptions of those in the diaspora, their reliance on social media, and why the crisis degenerated into violence so quickly. Among those interviewed were students, petit traders, farmers, religious people, teachers, unemployed, civil servants, homemakers, Internally Displaced Persons, and businesspeople. They lived in fear, and some had buried love ones resulting from the crisis. Their education ranged from primary school drop-out to advanced degrees. They were the most affected by the crisis. Some lost jobs, businesses, homes, and had seen evidence of the brutality of the war. Many believed their life had been turned upside down. Francophone in this study refers to one whose primary language (beside the local language or dialect) of communication language was French, and it was the same situation with Anglophones.

While many local newspapers were used, there was major use of The Post and The Guardian Post between September 2016 and June 2019. Responses to questionnaires were generally consistent with articles in the newspapers indicating that more people were probably getting information either from newspapers or social media. At the conclusion of the study the questionnaires will be deposited at the university archives.

3 Bush Faller refers to description of those who left the country in search for greener pastures and frequently return to the country with resources to spend. For more on this see, Julius Amin, Understanding the protest of February 2008 in Cameroon. Africa Today. 58(4), pp. 20–43

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ct_SLnAGDuM