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The Anglophone Cameroon crisis: April 2019 update

By Jon Lunn and Louisa Brooke-Holland

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Summary

Relations between the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon and the country’s dominant Francophone elite have long been fraught. Over the past three years, tensions have escalated seriously and since October 2017 violent conflict has erupted between armed separatist groups and the security forces, with both sides being accused of committing human rights abuses.

The tensions originate in a complex and contested decolonisation process in the late-1950s and early-1960s, in which Britain, as one of the colonial powers, was heavily involved. Federal arrangements were scrapped in 1972 by a Francophone-dominated central government. Many English-speaking Cameroonians have long complained that they are politically, economically and linguistically marginalised. Some have called for full independence for the Anglophone regions.

The trigger for the current crisis was the appointment of French-educated judges to courts in the English-speaking regions. Local lawyers demanded their removal and the restoration of a federal system of government. By the end of 2016, local teachers and lawyers had launched a campaign of strikes and demonstrations. University students and other activists began to get involved too. The security forces responded heavily-handedly. The Internet and all educational institutions were closed down.

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

Since then, numerous armed separatist groups have emerged and begun a violent campaign for independence. The security forces have responded in kind. Both sides stand accused of committing serious human rights abuses. Ordinary civilians are often caught in the middle – at least 500 have reportedly died. More than 400,000 people have been displaced, with over 30,000 crossing into Nigeria. There have also been reports of clashes between rival armed separatist groups. Seriously flawed presidential elections took place in Cameroon in October 2018. 85 year-old president Paul Biya, who has been in office since 1982, sought re-election and won again. The runner-up, Maurice Kamto, leader of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC), who had expressed sympathy for some Anglophone grievances, disputed the result and claimed victory. He called for peaceful protests.

Despite a heavy security clampdown, there was a mass boycott of the vote in the Anglophone regions. This was the main reason why Joshua Osih, the candidate of the party which traditionally has garnered most
support in the Anglophone regions, the Social Democratic Front, finished fourth.

There has so far been no improvement in the situation during 2019. If anything, levels of violence have increased. In a report issued on 28 March, Human Rights Watch said that since October “at least 170 civilians have been killed in over 220 incidents in the North-West and South-West regions.”

Protests called by the MRC took place in several cities in January 2019. Then on 28 January, Kamto and other leaders of the MRC were arrested, leading to more protests. In mid-February he and 130 of his supporters were charged by a military court with rebellion, insurrection and “hostility to the Fatherland”. In April, the authorities banned some planned MRC demonstrations.

So, what are the prospects? The outlook looks bleak. Although international engagement on the Anglophone Cameroon crisis has gradually increased, there are no signs currently that this will produce a change of stance on the part of either the Cameroon government or the armed separatists. Mediation efforts by the Catholic Church have so far led nowhere.

It is impossible to say how many people in the two Anglophone regions support secession. Some might still be satisfied by a return to meaningful federalism. But there is no indication that the central government is willing to consider restoring anything approaching federalism. Cosmetic measures remain the order of the day.

Official intransigence appears to be strengthening the hands of the secessionists. There are serious tensions between some of the different armed separatist groups involved on the ground, which further complicates the prospects for a peaceful settlement further down the line.

Note: since 2012 Cameroon government forces have also been engaged in military operations in the far north of the country against the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram. This briefing does not discuss this conflict. In August 2018 the International Crisis Group published the latest in a series of reports on this conflict, [Cameroon’s Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/africa region/cameroon/cameroons-far-north-a-new-chapter-in-the-fight-against-boko-haram).
1. History and its legacies

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

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

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

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

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

The German protectorate of Kamerun was established in 1884. In 1916 the German administration was overthrown by combined French-British-Belgian military operations during the First World War, and in 1919 the territory was divided into British and French spheres of influence. In 1922 both zones became subject to mandates of the League of Nations, which allocated four-fifths of the territory to French administration as French Cameroun, and the other one-fifth, comprising two long areas along the eastern
In 1946 the mandates were converted into United Nations (UN) trust territories, still under their respective French and British administrations. However, growing anti-colonial sentiment made it difficult for France and Britain to resist the UN Charter’s promise of eventual self-determination for all inhabitants of trust territories. In 1956 French Cameroun became an autonomous state within the French Community, and on 1 January 1960 proceeded to full independence as the Republic of Cameroun. Ahmadou Ahidjo, the leader of the Union Camerounaise, who hailed from northern Cameroun, was elected as the country’s first President.

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

The British government of the day opposed there being a ‘third option’ for British Cameroonian voters at the time of the 1961 plebiscite: an independent state. This stance was widely supported by other governments at the UN. The British view was partly based on a conviction that such a state would not be economically viable, but also on the its wish that both parts of British Cameroons should merge with Nigeria. However, things did not go according to plan and the southern part of British Cameroons voted instead to merge with French Cameroun.

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

It should be noted that there is some ambiguity in how the term ‘independence’ is used by its supporters. For some, this must mean full

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independent statehood. Supporters of full independence often refer to the putative state as ‘Ambazonia’. For others, a return to genuine federalism might suffice.

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

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

However, while there is much truth in this statement, a bit of caution may be justified on this count. A 2008 academic study noted that, in a country of over 250 African languages, a significant minority of Cameroonians spoke neither French nor English. But it also acknowledged that ‘pidgin English’ was the lingua franca in the bulk of the country, with at least 50% of the population speaking it. It added there was also an emerging ‘Camfranglais’ or ‘Francamglais’ amongst the young in Cameroon’s two main cities, Yaounde and Douala.2

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

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

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

Since 2015, tensions have escalated seriously – to the point that serious violent conflict has now broken out.3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amnesty International estimated that at least 17 people were killed in these clashes. Amnesty said: “the security forces must cease unnecessary and excessive use of force, and protesters should be

3 Since 2012 Cameroon government forces have also been engaged in military operations in the far north of the country against the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram. This briefing does not discuss this conflict. In August 2018 the International Crisis Group published the latest in a series of reports on this conflict, Cameroon’s Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram
peaceful if they want to make their voices heard. The government should investigate these killings.”

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

By the end of 2017, the secessionist insurgency was gathering momentum. The number of security forces personnel killed in English-speaking regions in November-December 2017 totalled seventeen. Dozens of civilians were reportedly killed by the security forces.
3. 2018: main developments

The violence continued unabated during 2018.

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

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

There was a further proliferation of armed separatist groups in the two regions. For example, in February 2018 two new separatist armed groups – the Banso Resistance Army and the Donga Mantung Liberation Force – emerged.

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

Ordinary civilians were increasingly caught in the middle of what some were describing as a ‘dirty war’. Local civil society also faced intensified harassment.

There was an increase in the number of kidnappings in the two Anglophone regions. Ransoms are often demanded in return for release. By late May 2018, at least 50 people had been kidnapped. 12 European tourists were briefly detained by armed separatists in April.

After video evidence emerged, the authorities admitted that one separatist leader in detention had been brutally mistreated and promised to bring those responsible to justice.

At the end of May, over two dozen alleged insurgents were reportedly killed by the security forces in the town of Menka – the bloodiest clash since the violence began. At the same time, seven people – including one senior figure, radio presenter Mancho Bibixy, were sentenced to 10-15 years in jail on charges of ‘terrorism’. Critics claimed that these sentences were politically-motivated.

Seriously flawed presidential elections took place in Cameroon in October 2018. President Paul Biya sought re-election and won again. The runner-up, Maurice Kamto, leader of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC), who had expressed sympathy with some Anglophone grievances, disputed the result and claimed victory. He called for peaceful protests.

Despite a heavy security clampdown, there was a mass boycott of the vote in the Anglophone regions. This was the main reason why Joshua Osih, the candidate of the party which traditionally has garnered most
support from the Anglophone regions, the Social Democratic Front, finished fourth.

In late-November, Kamto called on Francophone Cameroonians to hold general strikes every Monday afternoon in solidarity with Anglophone Cameroonians.

In November 2018, separatists kidnapped 81 people at a school in the North West. Following international criticism, they were quickly released. But another ten were kidnapped at another school later in the same month. They were freed after a military operation. In December, the traditional ruler of Nso was briefly abductedit by separatists.

Amidst growing international concern about the situation (see below), in December President Biya pardoned 289 detainees being held on relatively minor charges.

There were also numerous reports of clashes between rival armed separatist groups during 2018. For example, in December, there was fighting between the Ambazonia Defence Forces and the Southern Cameroon Defence Forces.

Catholic Church-led efforts to mediate looked to hold some promise for a while but ultimately foundered. In July 2018, Cardinal Christian Tumi announced that an ‘Anglophone General Conference’ would be held in August. It was subsequently postponed to late-November. However, the government did not offer its support. When the head of the organising committee received death threats and resigned just before it was scheduled to take place, the conference was again postponed.
4. Events during 2019 and future prospects

There has so far been no improvement in the situation during 2019. If anything, levels of violence have increased. At least 100 people – a combination of civilians, armed separatists and government forces – were reportedly killed in violent incidents during February alone.

Both sides continue to be accused of committing human rights abuses.

In a detailed report issued on 28 March, Human Rights Watch said that since October “at least 170 civilians have been killed in over 220 incidents in the North-West and South-West regions.” The report describes some of these incidents.

Earlier this month, Human Rights Watch accused the security forces of killing five civilians during an attack on the village of Meluf in the North-West region. They were reportedly executed or shot as they attempted to flee. The group described the attack as part of a growing trend towards security force violence against health workers and health clinics in the region.

Protests called by Maurice Kamto took place in several cities in January 2019. Then on 28 January, Kamto and other leaders of the MRC were arrested, leading to more protests. In mid-February he and 130 of his supporters were charged by a military court with rebellion, insurrection and “hostility to the Fatherland”. In April, the authorities banned some planned MRC demonstrations.

So, what are the prospects for an end to the Anglophone Cameroon crisis? The outlook looks bleak. Although international engagement with the crisis has gradually increased (see below), there are no signs currently that this will produce a change of stance on the part of either the Cameroon government or the armed separatists. Efforts at mediation by the Catholic Church have so far led nowhere. No fresh date has been set for the proposed Anglophone General Conference.

It is impossible to say how many people in the two Anglophone regions support secession. Some might still be satisfied by a return to meaningful federalism. But there is no indication that the central government is willing to consider restoring anything approaching federalism. Cosmetic measures remain the order of the day. In early January, President Biya appointed an Anglophone prime minister, Joseph Dion Ngute. However, he is a loyal supporter of Biya.

The government seems confident that it can prevail predominantly by military means. But official intransigence appears to be strengthening the hands of the secessionists. To complicate matters further, there appear to be tensions between some of the different armed separatist groups involved on the ground. If the time comes for negotiation, this could make a lasting peace even more difficult to achieve.
5. Response of Western governments and the UN

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

The UK government has said it is ready to help Cameroon in resolving the crisis, should the UK’s good offices be requested – but this would in practice mean an invitation from the Cameroon government, which seems unlikely to arise.

The international community – the UK included – has begun to engage more intensively with the crisis since the beginning of 2018.

The UK’s Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin visited Cameroon in February 2018. While there, she urged all sides to de-escalate the conflict and begin dialogue.

Similar messages have been reiterated on numerous occasions by UK ministers since then.

Harriet Baldwin issued a statement in late-October 2018 after the presidential and parliamentary elections in Cameroon. Turnout in the Anglophone regions of the country was extremely low. In the statement, she said:

   The UK congratulates President Paul Biya on his re-election.
   We remain deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation in the Anglophone regions, which continue to suffer from high levels of violence and human rights abuses perpetrated by both security forces and armed separatists. The UK calls on the Government of Cameroon to now take urgent action to address the crisis in the Anglophone regions.
   We hope that President Biya will reach out to all sections of Cameroonian society and work to build confidence and trust. It is crucial for all parties to engage in a peaceful and structured process leading to constitutional reforms, as previously set out by the President, and avoid excessive use of force.
   The UK is concerned at the worsening humanitarian situation in the Anglophone regions and the impact this is having on the lives of ordinary people. We call on all parties to grant full and unhindered humanitarian access to the affected population.
   The UK will continue to work alongside the international community to encourage and support efforts to resolve the Anglophone crisis. It is vital that all parties now work together to secure a peaceful future for all Cameroonian.

There were parliamentary exchanges on the issue in mid-November 2018 in the House of Lords. Baroness Goldie replied for the UK government. Responding to claims that the government had not taken
a strong enough line on official abuses, according ‘equivalence’ to violations committed by the Cameroon authorities and some of the rebel armed groups, she said:

We believe that the causes of the conflict are clear: decades of the marginalisation of anglophones, a deep sense that English-language usage is being squeezed from public life and a heavy-handed security response to legitimate protests. As the noble Lord notes, Amnesty International has reported that 185 members of the security services have been killed by anglophone separatists, so we do not claim moral equivalence but neither can we neglect the role that armed separatists are playing in worsening the situation. I suggest to him that we do not claim there is a binary choice; we think that a range of options are available to the international community, with sustained diplomatic pressure being the starting point. Now that the presidential elections are over, we and our international partners are calling on President Biya to commit urgently to a process that resolves this crisis.

In January 2019, DFID minister Lord Bates set out the UK’s humanitarian response to the crisis:

On 13th December we announced a £2.5m contribution to the UN appeal for the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, with £2 million disbursed immediately to UNICEF. This support will begin to: treat 1,300 children who are most at risk of dying from severe acute malnutrition; provide essential drugs to treat 5,700 children for deadly diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, and acute respiratory infections; provide 10,000 people with water and sanitation kits including water purification supplies and other household items including washable sanitary napkins and tooth brushes; provide 2,000 mosquito-nets to prevent malaria; vaccinate 3,500 children against measles; and identify and support many unaccompanied children.

The UK government has said that it supports the Catholic Church-led initiative to convene an Anglophone General Conference.

The UK made a joint statement with Austria about the crisis at the UN Human Rights Council in late-March.

The crisis was discussed most recently in the House of Commons on 2 April 2019. During those exchanges, Harriet Baldwin said that the UK government had asked the Commonwealth to engage with the crisis.

In recent years, the UK has adjusted its travel advice for the two regions. Today it advises against all travel there, except for one coastal town, Limbe.

The US has issued some increasingly forthright public statements about the crisis. In May 2018, the US Ambassador to Cameroon, Peter Barlerin, accused government forces of carrying out “targeted killings” and other human rights abuses in the two Anglophone regions. He also criticised separatist violence.

In December 2018 ten US Senators called for a political solution to the crisis and urged the US government to impose sanctions on individuals implicated in serious human rights abuses.

The US has been providing assistance to the Cameroon armed forces in connection with its campaign against Boko Haram and other jihadist
armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin region. However, in February 2019 it was announced that over $17 million in military aid was being terminated.

In March 2019, US Assistance Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy visited Cameroon. He reportedly called for the release of detained opposition leader Maurice Kamto and other political prisoners, urging all parties to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis.

France has traditionally been strong ally of President Biya. French companies have a major stake in the country. While joining calls for inclusive dialogue to end the crisis, so far it has been relatively reticent in its public criticism of its ally. President Macron reportedly phoned Biya to express concern about the arrest of Maurice Kamto and others in late-January.

France is also party to EU public statements about the crisis. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, echoed US concerns at the time of Tibor Nagy’s visit to Cameroon in March. This was the first statement issued in her name, rather than by a spokesperson.

The UN has become more involved with the crisis in the last year or so. The Security Council officially discussed in August and December 2018. At the December meeting, the US and UK called for the release of detainees, immediate talks between the warring parties and for access to the two Anglophone regions for UN agencies and human rights organisations.

The UN has also been coordinating humanitarian efforts in Anglophone Cameroon. In March 2019 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees issued an appeal for $184 million to assist those displaced by violence.

In its report of late-March, Human Rights Watch made the following recommendations for international action:

Cameroon’s partners, France in particular, should increase pressure on the government to hold those responsible for abuse to account, and ensure that any support to Cameroonian security forces does not contribute to or facilitate human rights violations. The UN Human Rights Council should ask the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) or relevant UN experts to conduct a fact-finding mission into allegations of human rights abuses in Cameroon. Members of the UN Security Council should formally add Cameroon to the Council’s agenda, request a briefing on the situation from the UN Secretary General, and make clear that individuals responsible for serious human rights violations could face sanctions.
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