

Unrest in Anglophone Regions and the Persistent Boko Haram Threat in Far North

What should the Cameroonian Government do to Restore Stability and Security?



Over the past four months, Cameroon's political stability and security have been increasingly threatened on two fronts. On the one hand long-term grievances in the marginalized Anglophone (northwest and southwest) regions¹ have recently grown in size and scope, turning into a massive political protest, with some groups calling for federalism, and others calling for secession between English-speaking and French-speaking provinces. The ongoing 'Anglophone crisis' (which started late October 2016) appears to have reached a dead-end, as the government has not seemed to give in to protesters' demands.

On the other hand, in Far North, Cameroon's poorest region, Boko Haram has been seriously jeopardizing local security and threatening the stability of the Lake Chad region² since 2011. Although weakened by the ongoing intervention by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)³, the group seems to have adapted its modus operandi since 2015 and continues to carry out deadly attacks on civilians and security forces. Such issues raise questions about Cameroon's ability to ensure security in Far North and restore stability in English-speaking regions. What should the government do to put an end to the ongoing Anglophone crisis and to Boko Haram's activities? The present report insists on the urgent need to (re)open negotiations with Anglophone activists to avoid a likely escalation of violence in the southwest and northwest regions, and advocates for a shift in the strategy against Boko Haram in the Far North province, from a solely military approach to long-term investment in socio-economic development.



Key Data (2016)

Total Population: 23.7 million
Languages: 4/5 French-speaking, 1/5 English-speaking
GDP per capita: 1,328.64 USD
Net School Enrolment Rate: 84.7%
HDI: 0.512
Poverty rate: 37.5% (living below poverty line – less than \$1 per day)

Source: World Bank

¹ Since the 1990s, President Paul Biya has been facing stiff resistance from the Anglophone minority who accused him of discriminatory politics vis-à-vis the English-speaking populations, which produced disparities in investment in infrastructure and health care services between English- and French-speaking regions.

² Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria.

³ A coalition of armed forces composed of Beninese, Chadian, Nigerian and Nigerian troops aiming to combat terrorism in the Lake Chad region.

1. The Anglophone crisis: Heading towards an escalation of violence?

President Biya seems to be in control

After four months of strikes and demonstrations across Anglophone regions, and despite pressure, Paul Biya, in power since 1982, seems in control of the situation for several reasons.



Biya in Dec. 2016 (Source: Africa News)

First, the protest movement does not appear to have a clear goal, with different groups fighting for different causes and using different methods. Since October 2016, English-speaking lawyers and teachers have been on strike in the northwest and southwest regions, protesting against the 'overwhelming use of French' in courts and schools, and economic and political exclusion. However, after attempts at dialogue with the government failed in the early stages of the contestation, what was originally a corporate movement turned into an eclectic movement with more political grievances.

The moderate Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), which has been pushing for federalism, and calling for 'ghost town' shutdown operations, has joined the protesting lawyers and teachers, as well as the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), which appears to be more radical, for its demands for secession⁴. Spontaneous movements have also blossomed in Anglophone regions, pressing for the release of activists arrested during protests. As a consequence, the multiplicity of groups and claims makes it difficult for the protesters to unify and stand for one cause in the negotiations with the government.

Furthermore, thanks to his three decades in power, Biya's tight control of the Parliament⁵ and the army has emboldened him, as it can be seen in his absolute refusal to negotiate. This hard-line approach may be a tactic to increase his popularity vis-à-vis the French-speaking people, some of whom may be wary of radicalization by some protesters. In addition, the fragmentation of opposition parties is to Biya's advantage.

The President suppressed dissent by placing major Anglophone cities (such as Buea and Bamenda) under high surveillance by troops and by passing a series of repressive measures. For instance, on 17 January, the leaders of the CACSC were arrested and accused by the authorities of calling for civil war during demonstrations, only a few hours after an order outlawing the CACSC and the SCNC was issued. A day later, the government shut down the Internet service in the English-speaking regions without prior notice. A move which may be seen as an attempt to control information flow and reduce Anglophone activists' ability to coordinate their activities.

Growing tensions likely to push Biya to the wall

Biya's hard-line approach may not be beneficial to restoring peace as it may escalate the crisis. In the past few weeks, there has been increasing pressure from Anglophone activists and Parliamentarians (MPs) from his own party, as well as the international community, demanding that the government finds a way out of the impasse.

Firstly, Biya's absolute refusal to meet the moderate federalists gives the impression that he does not want to admit the existence of a deeply-rooted crisis in Anglophone regions, but only recognizes the issue of strikes. Thus, the government recently promised to recruit 1,000 English-speaking teachers and to allocate two billion FCFA to reinforce the Anglophone education system. However, these symbolical measures may not be enough to address long-time

⁴ The SCNC has a military faction, the Southern Cameroons People Organisation (SCAPO), which has been responsible for some violent clashes with police during the protests.

⁵ The ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (RDPC), of which Biya is the president, has 148 seats out of 180 in the National Assembly. Recent attempts to rebuild a solid opposition among the fragmented opposition parties have failed, such as the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon led by Maurice Kamto since 2012.

grievances, especially after the violent repression of protests by security forces⁶. An approach which has hardened the position of Anglophone activists and created an impasse.

Additionally, Biya's radical attitude towards federalists and secessionists may have contributed to turning the moderates into radicals: the 17 January 2017 ban made no distinction between the two groups, considered equally dangerous for the country's security. The president may have made a mistake in ignoring the differences between federalists and secessionists, and in underestimating their power of resilience.

Even after the arrest of the CACSC leaders, interim leaders have emerged and, from their exile in Europe, have intensified calls for 'ghost town' operations as a strategy to bring the government to the negotiating table. Economic activities are now nearly paralyzed and most English-speaking families refuse to send their children to school. Even Ni John Fru Ndi, leader of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the main opposition party, who repeatedly rejected any affiliation to the Anglophone cause, despite a long-time electoral success in northwest, announced a march in Douala on 4 March to raise awareness on federalism, finally postponed due to a massive deployment of troops by the government⁷.

It now seems clear that the authorities fear losing control over the situation and feel pressured, as shown by their recent initiatives. As an example, on three occasions, the authorities have adjourned the trial of the CACSC leaders arrested in January, to avoid unrest. Likewise, the mid-February visit in Bamenda by two archbishops, on the government's initiative, which was aimed to ending strikes and convince parents to send their children back to school, appears as a paltry attempt to re-establish dialogue with local populations.

Furthermore, the Internet shutdown prompted immediate reactions from the citizens, including those living in unaffected areas, as well as condemnations from the international community⁸. Additionally, the blackout caused businesses of the English-speaking provinces to lose over \$1.39 million in the first three weeks, and forced many companies of the Silicon Mountain⁹ to resettle in Yaoundé, thus increasing the anger of Anglophone populations.



A social media campaign using the hashtag #BringBackOurInternet has grown in the unaffected areas (Source: Camer.be)

Biya's hard-line approach may have regrettable consequences as it failed to restore peace, and his own camp seems to realize it. Over the last couple of weeks, while Biya's authority had never been challenged among his supporters, some RDPC MPs have been urging him to release the detained protesters and consider federalism as a conceivable solution

⁶ Security forces were accused of the killing of seven protesters and arrested hundred others in marches in Buea and Bamenda in December. In February, in Ndop (northwest), police shot two people and wounded ten others during a protest calling for the release of dozens of people arrested on suspicion of setting fire to two Francophone schools.

⁷ Cameroon Concord News, 'SDF pro federalism march: Troops block major roads in Bepanda-Douala', Available at <http://www.cameroonconcordnews.com/sdf-pro-federalism-march-troops-block-major-roads-in-bepanda-douala/> (Accessed on 06/03/2017)

⁸ On 14 February, the United Nations called to restore internet access, invoking an alleged violation of basic rights.

⁹ The Silicon Mountain refers to the technology ecosystem in Fako Division, Southwest Region, which has seen a rise in tech start-ups and a growing community of developers and designers as well as universities.

to the current stalemate¹⁰. French-speaking populations have also expressed their concerns about the need for dialogue, as they become more informed about the situation. Henceforth, pushed to the wall by his own camp, Biya must break his silence and start negotiations with Anglophone leaders, to avoid a likely escalation of violence and, maybe, solve the crisis.

2. The Boko Haram threat in Far North: The need for a shift in strategy

Boko Haram's change in modus operandi

Like Anglophone regions, Far North has a long history of insecurity and marginalization. Before Boko Haram's arrival in the region, Nigerian rebel groups, highway bandits and traffickers thrived due to the government's neglect (including a lack of investment in infrastructure and education¹¹) and instability in neighbouring countries. Since 2011, Boko Haram (based in Nigeria) has been exploiting such vulnerabilities, using Far North as a rear base and for recruitment purposes, especially among disaffected youths and local Muslim ethnic groups.

Up until now, the group has carried out nearly 500 attacks in the region (including over 100 suicide bombings and the abduction of over 1,000 people). Notable operations include the kidnapping of a French family of seven in February 2013 (released two months after) and a series of raids in Borno State (Nigeria) in January 2015, leaving over 2,000 civilians dead. Yet the impact of its actions goes far beyond casualties, as it has eroded trust between communities and displaced up to 115,000 people, now living in refugee camps near the border with Nigeria.



Boko Haram's activities in Far North – November 2016 (Source: Crisis Group)

¹⁰ Cameroon Info, 'CDPM MPs appeal on Biya to release detained Anglophone 'Extremists'', Available at <http://www.cameroon-info.net/article/cameroon-anglophone-crisis-north-west-cpdm-mps-appeal-on-biya-to-release-detained-anglophone-281886.html> (Accessed on 23/02/2017)

¹¹ 74.3% of Far North's population live below the poverty line, compared with a national average of 37.5%. Most roads are unpaved and there are only 6 hospitals for 3.8 million people. Regarding education, Far North has a school enrolment rate of 46%, compared with a national average of 84.7%.

The government reacted slowly to Boko Haram's first attack of the group on the army in March 2014, but mounted a series of effective offensives in the following months. In May 2014, 3,000 soldiers were deployed near the border with Nigeria, and, in July 2015, Cameroon joined the MNJTF. The coalition claimed to have killed 2,000 Boko Haram fighters and imprisoned over 900 others in the operations carried out in Far North in 2015-2016¹², which drastically weakened the group's capabilities. Nevertheless, this massive deployment of soldiers and the government's hard-line rhetoric may no longer be fit for purpose.

After losing control of its acquired territories, experienced fighters and supplies, Boko Haram has shifted its strategy from offensives aimed at seizing swathes of land (with large deployments of fighters) to an asymmetric warfare involving small, independent fighting units, which carry out hit-and-run incursions to get supplies, and to terrorise locals. Since June 2015, incidents involving looting of food and medicines, the burning of villages along the Nigerian border, and mass murders and suicide bombings against civilians, have increased (see map below). This change in strategy may have been the result of Boko Haram's declared allegiance to IS in March 2015, with the aim of destroying the trust of Cameroonians in the state capacity to ensure their security.

From military intervention to education and humanitarian aid programmes

Boko Haram's recent attacks¹³ raise concerns about the group's capacity to recover and resupply quickly, despite suffering defeats (such as during the past year 2016). Such attacks also expose the limits of counter-terrorism operations. The group has indeed been able to adapt to the increased pressure by the MNJTF, which is supported by the US army and French intelligence forces. Although weakened and probably not able to regain the warfare capabilities of its beginnings, the group represents an ongoing threat. Even though the MNJTF's intervention has been partly successful, it has not addressed Boko Haram's change in strategy.

Furthermore, the splitting of Boko Haram in June 2016¹⁴ is one of the reasons why the government should shift its security policies to fight radicalism. The Cameroonian authorities have overlooked the role of counter- and de-radicalisation programmes in preventing young locals from joining the ranks of Boko Haram. There should be a shift from a security-based approach to a long-term response, including humanitarian aid for the thousands of refugees in Far North, and substantial investment in infrastructure (such as roads, hospitals and schools) and education in a long neglected region.

Conclusion

With no shift in policy, the Cameroonian government is likely to face an increasingly tense situation, which would seriously affect the country's security. On the Anglophone crisis, Biya's handling of the situation has proved inadequate. The government has to break the current deadlock by (re)opening the dialogue with Anglophone activists. On the Boko Haram issue, the authorities need to go beyond a military response and address the lack of development in Far North, with a particular focus on education and humanitarian aid. The recent, first-time visit by a delegation of the UN Security Council on 2 March, to assess the government and civilians' needs, may be a crucial step in the fight against terrorism in the region. As a long-term vision, the government should consider investing in the marginalized Anglophone and Far North regions to narrow the gap in development to decrease the feeling of exclusion and marginalization among locals. This, in turn, could restore Cameroon's unity and security.

¹² Crisis Group, 'Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram', Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroon-confronting-boko-haram> (Accessed on 01/03/2017)

¹³ On February 2, five UN workers were killed in an armed attack in Kontcha and on February 23, a suicide bomber killed two civilians in Wouro Dole.

¹⁴ In June 2016, a Boko Haram split into two factions: a radical one, led by Abubakar Shekau, operates in Mayo Sava Department, and carries out pillaging and suicide bombing operations against civilians, and forced recruitments; and a more moderate one led by Abu Musa al-Barnawi, operating in Logone et Chari Department, which is more inclined towards targeting security forces, and uses material incentives to recruit.