Is the Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon an Ethnonational Conflict?
Written by Njie Makolo Joseph

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The birth of the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961 marked the reunification of the two territories that had undergone different colonial experiences since World War I. The erstwhile German Kamerun was partitioned between the French who tried to culturally assimilate the country, and the British who ruled indirectly (Ngoh, 1988: 245). Cameroon is a country in central Africa often described as "Africa in miniature" but has come to the spotlight lately due to crisis of identity and cultural assimilation of the minority English speaking people. Southern Cameroon's problem popularly known as the "Anglophone Crisis" is as old as the country. It is the expression of a poorly managed decolonization process, that saw two distinct (British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroon) people come together to form a country void of any real foundations that could guarantee coexistence (Nkongho, 2018).

Over the last twenty months, Cameroon has been the focus of a nation sliding into civil war in Africa, from what started in November 2016 as legitimate grievances by English speaking lawyers, teachers, students and civil society over the prolonged marginalization of Southern Cameroons, but peaceful protests turned deadly when the government military shot at peaceful protesters, wounding many and killing several (Nkongho, 2018). Leaders of lawyers, teachers and civil society organizations made themselves available to dialogue for a quick solution (Nkongho, 2018). Unfortunately, during the dialogue process, the government rejected talks over a return to federalism which existed from 1961-1972, which guaranteed bilingualism, biculturalism, bi-juralism, equal opportunity for all and provided constitutional provisions for power sharing, economic independence and freedoms (Ngoh, 1988).

Cameroon like most other African countries has its internal problems although there has been no major armed conflict since independence in 1961. However, a problem that exists is that the minority English speaking group is being dominated by the French speaking majority and which also controls the government. Thus Anglophone Cameroon has been at the forefront of ethno-regional protests and which demands rearrangement of state power. Konings and Nyamnjoh, (2003: 2) posit that there is a widespread feeling in the Anglophone regions that reunification with Francophone Cameroon in 1961 has led to a growing marginalization of the Anglophone minority in the state project controlled by the Francophone elites, endangering its political heritage and identity. It was not until the political liberalization process in the early1990s that the Anglophone elites began to mobilize the regional population against the allegedly subordinated position of Anglophones and to demand for self-determination and autonomy, reintroducing federalism and secession to the political agenda. Still both authors (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003:2; Eyoh, 1998a: 249-276; 1998b: 338-359) mentioned that, ethno-regional divisions and tensions also exist within the Anglophone community itself, particularly among elites in the South West province (the coastal forest area) and the inland-savannah area (the so-called Grassfields), now North West Province. It should be noted that the post- colonial state has taken advantage of these existing contradictions within the Anglophone community to deconstruct the Anglophone identity.

Dynamics of the Current Crisis in Anglophone Cameroon

The current Anglophone crisis is an extension of the historical resistance to the alleged assimilation of the indigenous English-speaking population. It began with the provoked harassment of Anglophone lawyers engaged in peaceful

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protest marches in September 2016 to vent their grievances over the perceived marginalisation of the Anglophone Common Law practice in the country. In October 2016, they went on strike, and in November, the Anglophone Teachers Trade Union also staged a solidarity strike to protest against the distortions confronting the educational system in the Anglophone regions (Pefok, 2017).

In December 2016, activist lawyer Felix Agbor Balla formed the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), which championed the initial demands of the Anglophone community that included:

1. An end to the marginalisation and annexationist disposition of Yaounde.
2. A return to the two-state federation in the management of public affairs in

Cameroon that was the basis of the union entered in 1961.

1. Preservation of the cherished legal and education systems of Anglophone Cameroon.
2. Unconditional release of over 100 bona-fide Cameroonians arrested in connection with the protests in the Northwest and Southwest regions since September 2016, and
3. Immediate restoration of internet services throughout the Anglophone regions (Tchoyi, 2017).

Following failed attempts to address the demands of the Anglophone population, President Biya described the agitators as "a group of manipulated and exploited extremist rioters whose activities have led to the loss of lives, destruction of public and private buildings, crippling of economic activities and the desecration of sacred national symbols" (Okereke, 2018:8). This tone in Biya's 2016 New Year eve national address to the nation set the stage for the repression of the pro-federalism aspirations of the Anglophone population. President Biya's resolve to crush the opposition was met with civil disobedience. On 9 January 2017, Agbor Balla declared Operation Ghost Town Resistance (OGTR), which is chiefly characterised by strict compliance to a sit-at-home ritual every Monday and Tuesday or any other day declared by the CACSC leadership. During this period, the inhabitants of the two Anglophone regions in Cameroon stayed away from the offices and business premises thereby bringing all political and economic activities to a halt (Okereke, 2018: 8).

The Biya government responded to OGTR with the proscription of the CACSC including the arrest and detention of its leaders notably Agbor Balla, Mancho Bibixy (leader of the coffin protest in Bamenda), Fontem Aforteka'a Neba (lecturer at the University of Buea), and Paul Ayah Abine (Justice of the Supreme Court) (Caxton, 2017). Other leaders such as Bobga Harmony Mbuton, Wilfred Tassang and Elias Eyambe Ebai fled from Cameroon. The Biya regime further severed internet access in the two Anglophone dominated regions of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon. This measure, which was interpreted by the Anglophone population as a redefinition of Cameroon territory, escalated the grievances against Yaounde (Okereke, 2018).

In August 2017, President Paul Biya ordered the release of several detainees but avoided dialogue prompting mass protest in September 2017 with estimated 500,000 people. The government's response was the brutal crackdown which led to the purported declaration of independence on October 1, 2017 (Nkongho, 2018). While approximately 900,000 unarmed protesters were celebrating this declaration, government troops shot at thousands with automatic rifles and helicopters (Nkongho, 2018). This marked the start of military attacks upon villages, orders for villages to be evacuated, mass exodus of villagers into Nigeria, creating 50,000 refugees and 200,000 internally displaced persons today (Nkongho, 2018). All of these prompted an armed campaign by civilians to defend their homes and villages, leading to full-blown armed insurgency (Nkongho, 2018).

The Anglophone diaspora took over the leadership of the struggle, following the arrest and detention of the CACSC leadership. The Anglophone diaspora substituted the initial quest for the restoration of two-state federalism with the demand for a separate State of Ambazonia (Okereke, 2018). Several groups emerged, mobilising Anglophone nationalism within Cameroon and beyond towards the attainment of Ambazonia. Prominent among these groups include the CACSC, Southern Cameroon Peoples Organisation (SCAPO), Southern Cameroons South Africa Forum (SCSAF), Movement for the Restoration of Independence in Southern Cameroon (MoRISC) and Southern Cameroonians in Nigeria (SCINGA). Others are the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), Republic of

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Ambazonia (RoA), Ambazonia Governing Council (AGC) and the Southern Cameroon Youth League (SCYL) (Okereke, 2018). Other similar groups projecting Anglophone nationalism and aspirations were also formed in Europe and America. The Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front (SCACUF) under the leadership of Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe emerged as the umbrella organisation for all these groups. The SCACUF established the Southern Cameroon Broadcasting Corporation (SCBC) to sustain Anglophone aspirations through its propaganda. Presently, the Ambazonia Governing Council has been renamed the Interim Government (IG) of Ambazonia (Okereke, 2018: 9).

Causes of the Conflict

Eko Lyombe (2003) views the Anglophone problem as a combination of political, economic and social grievances expressed by the English-speaking minorities in the predominated French speaking republic of Cameroon. These grievances are expressed in terms of discrimination, marginalization and second-class citizenship. Because the fundamental causes of the conflict have not yet been addressed or resolved, it has led to the escalation of the conflict which has resulted to the destabilisation of social and economic activities in the economy (Lyombe, 2003).

More specifically, the following can be identified as the causes of the conflict in Cameroon:

1. Failure to respect commitments to equitably take into account the institutional, legal and administrative cultures and traditions inherited from the former administering powers (Tchoyi, 2017).
2. Non-compliance to the solemn promises made during the referendum campaigns (referring to 1961 plebiscite and 1972 referendum) (Tchoyi, 2017).
3. Anglophone marginalization such as limited political representation, economic discrimination, discrimination in recruitment, training and education (Nkumbe, 2016).
4. Fear of assimilation through education (Nkumbe, 2016).

Why Is Cameroon's Conflict an Ethnonational Conflict?

The current conflict in Cameroon can be characterised as an ethnonational conflict for several reasons. Firstly, because the individual's environment in this case Cameroon is determined by a pyramid of social identities that people perceive (Reader, 2009: 26). William G. Cunningham notes that ethnic identities are very strong because of their composition as extended kingship groups, which are important in the development of in-groups and out-groups (Cunningham, 1998). This is an important concept in dealing with ethnic conflict. As Walker Connor puts it, conflict is the divergence of basic identity, which manifests itself in the **"us- them" syndrome** (Connor, 1994). The 'us-them' syndrome is widely used by people in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon. 'Us' being **Anglophones** while 'them' being **Francophones**. In multi-linguistic societies like Cameroon, ethnicity finds its way into a myriad of issues such as control of state power, development plans, educational controversies, resource control struggles, religious intolerance, land disputes and indigene-settler syndrome (migration and incomplete conquest). Along line of differences, these issues all become entangled with the wider ethno-national conflict. It makes conflict so complex and enduring. It permeates the very fabric of society and often a severe hindrance to conflict resolution (Reader, 2009: 26).

Secondly, Conversi (2002 & 2004) posits that once the prevailing opinion of the ethnic group perceives it to be distinct politically as well as culturally, then it becomes an **ethno-national group.** This is true with the case of the conflict in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon, where the 'Anglophones' also known as 'Southern Cameroonians who are regarded as an ethnic group with minority population where armed groups known as 'Ambazonia Defence Forces' feel their culture is being alienated and are politically motivated, thus seeking autonomy as was the case of the erstwhile southern Cameroon before reunification with La Republic du Cameroun in 1961.

Identity conflict is basically about ethno-national behaviour. It manifests in the pursuit of perceived human needs and values by a group in light of confrontation with the other competing ethnic groups within the confines of a single state (Reader, 2009: 31). One can sense that depth of emotion and sheer intensity of the identity-driven conflict by atrocities that are carried out by the violence extremes of competing ethno-religious groups. There is usually a

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convergence of thought on the importance of such concepts as **identity** and the dichotomy of **us-them**. It leads often to the perception of zero-sum game; winner takes all. Whether in ethnicity or religious, or ethno-religious context, emotional intelligence is always a missing link (Reader, 2009: 32).

The other concept of conflict is the negative identity. Cunningham (1998) describes this as when individuals suffer from low esteem through narcissistic injuries. Those who suffer from negative identity tend more towards maladaptive groups such as criminals and terrorist organisations to try to regain of their lost self-esteem.

Another concept is known as ethnic victimization. When groups are under political, economic, ecological or military stress, they become vicious and malicious. Joseph V. Montville defines the concept of ethnic victimization as the state of mind when the security of their group is shattered by violence and aggression; marginalization, exclusion, neglects, human and civil right violation (Reader, 2009: 32). Depending on the circumstances and pattern of regime responses, these groups (as in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon) feel that their survival is at stake, and in their own 'hands'. In time, they develop 'Siege mentality' and proclamation of no 'surrender'. It is fuelled by the developed **ethnic militia** and private security outfit.

Ethnic conflicts are hard to resolve because they are not about 'who gets what' but about 'I do not like you' (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006: 191). To cast the conflict in terms of a bargaining situation, each side places value on the other's loss of value (making a zero-sum game). A person in-flamed with hatred of an enemy is willing to lose value in absolute terms; to lose money, the support of allies, or even life to deprive the enemy of value as well (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006: 191).

Horowitz (1985) vividly describes the consequences of such conflicts. When ethnic violence occurs, unranked groups usually aim not at social transformation, but at something approaching sovereign autonomy; the exclusion of parallel ethnic groups from a share of power. Conversely, ethnic minorities feel marginalized, excluded and neglected. Conflict lines are drawn and can easily turn into violent actions like the case of Cameroon.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to ascertain whether the conflict in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon is an identity or ethno-national conflict. Using specific characteristics as seen above, the researcher concludes that it is an ethnonational conflict. The strength of the Anglophone resistance has decreased and many might go further to say that it has hit a brick wall due to the tactical and repressive mechanisms that have been utilized by the incumbent government to squash the resistance. However weak, the struggle still continues, though facing several internal divisions most prominently the southwest/northwest divide (both regions constitute the Anglophone Community).

What Southern Cameroon needs is strong international alliances and guarantors to push this struggle into the ultimate defining phase considering that the government is heavily supported by France, there is a need for such balance and though the Anglophone Diaspora has done a lot to generate international awareness, much still needs to be done even to achieve federalism talk less of complete separation and independence. Therefore there is need for unity and solidarity in the Anglophone Community in order to choose a concrete plan of action and reallocate its resources to guarantee its achievement.

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