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Cameroon is at a crucial moment of its history. For many years, its governance and security problems have attracted little international attention. But the country now faces conflicts in three of his ten administrative regions: Boko Haram in the Far North; and the conflict in the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest). Added to this is insecurity in the East, Adamaoua and North where 236,000 refugees have fled from militias in the Central African Republic.

Most of the country’s security threats stem from bad governance and an over-centralised political system, including highly centralized and personalized leadership, authoritarianism, vote rigging, political manipulation of ethnic tensions, widespread corruption and high scale human rights violations - which are long term and routinized practices in the country. Since 2010 Crisis Group has warned that the way Cameroon was governed was likely to sooner or later lead a frustrated population to express their anger violently with potentially dangerous consequences. This now appears to be happening, not only in the Anglophone areas, where an armed insurgency is emerging, but also in politics and wider society, where repression and communal antagonism are worsening.

The ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions is now the biggest security threat to Cameroon stability, which if left unaddressed could turn into civil war as has occurred in other African countries. October 2018 forthcoming presidential election is another potential flashpoint. After 25 years of rigged polls, Cameroonians are cynical but angry, and the pre-electoral period has seen a striking growth in inflammatory discourse pitting ethnic or linguistic groups against each other. The elections are driving social divisions and the risk of violence is greater than for previous elections. Violence during electoral period is certain, only the magnitude remains unknown.

Cameroon’s structural fragilities are worsening, with an 85 year old president in power for 36 years, whose centralized patronage model of governance has weakened opposition, but has generated huge discontent. Public liberties have been further eroded, meetings and marches of opposition parties have been systematically prohibited, leaders arrested, and journalists intimidated. Political tension is high and with elections just month away, there is no dialogue between government and opposition. Some civil society organizations and political parties are considering boycotting and expressing their discontent in the streets in Yaoundé and Douala, some with the express (but unrealistic) aim of removing Biya through popular protest. The country’s economy continues to deteriorate under pressure of the war against Boko Haram, the Anglophone crisis and the drop in oil price. The age of the President and growing sense that his succession is unprepared also deepens the above mentioned ethnical antagonisms within the top leadership of the regime.

The stability of the whole country is now of great concern. A collapse would have huge regional damages, impacting U.S interests. Cameroon is the leading economy of CEMAC economic zone in Central Africa, with about 35 per cent of the regional GDP. It also plays a pivotal role for the stability of countries like Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Central African Republic. Cameroon remains also a key component of the regional Multinational Joint Task Force created in 2015 to fight Boko Haram, and if its response weakens due to fundamental problems at the centre, Boko Haram and other jihadi groups could find in the Far North region a new sanctuary. Economically, the country is also an entry point for the Gulf of Guinea - an important off shore reserve of hydrocarbons - and plays an important role within the Gulf of Guinea maritime security architecture. Finally, Cameroon Anglophone regions border Nigeria. A civil war there will not only increase the current economic and humanitarian (34.000 refugees) costs of the conflict for Nigeria, but could encourage Nigerian own separatists’ movements such as Biafra and Ogoni or even in the Ijaw and Ejagham communities.

In summary, the cost of leaving Cameroon plunging into civil war and collapsing is far higher than the cost of putting political, diplomatic and economic pressure to avoid it. Cameroon's partners, including the U.S, have frequently provided the regime with decisive economic and military assistance. Though this has come with low pressure for reform, and the government has read international support as a carte blanche to continue to run the country as they wish. The regime has now factored a low level of international criticism into its calculations and seems intent on pursuing its course.

Most international partners are reluctant to criticize the regime. This includes European countries who follow the lead of a few countries with strong economic interests. For nearly four decades, the Cameroon regime has managed to play the divide and rule game between western powers, and has used the growing Chinese presence to discourage western critics. While cherishing the economic interests of the former colonial power, France, it has gradually favoured economic cooperation with China to the detriment of U.S. In late May 2018, amid the 20<sup>th</sup> of May National Day celebration, the US ambassador criticised Cameroonian army for killings of civilians and burning of villages in Anglophone regions, but French president sent to president Biya a congratulatory message, without mentioning human rights violations in the Anglophone regions or in the Far North. The following weeks, Biya official twitter account published other congratulatory messages from Russia, China, and Syrian president Bachar Al Assad.

The U.S and other partners should push Cameroon government to engage in serious dialogue with Anglophone leaders, from federalists to separatists, on appeasing measures, such as the liberation of Anglophone detainees, and on the form of the State, in order to avoid a civil war. U.S should also push Cameroon government to enact comprehensive governance and electoral reforms before October 2018 to reduce electoral violence and avoid post electoral instability. U.S and other Donors should use their leverage, both financial and diplomatic, to send stronger messages to the government. If the U.S wants to act under a unified western position, it should lead talks at capital levels so as to find a common strong position.

## **Background**

The roots of Cameroon's current problems lie in the colonial period, when "state building" was done at the expense of pluralism. In the independence era as well, an aversion to dialogue and an inability to accommodate discontent or minority views has blocked political reform. The ensuing frustrations have led to periodic explosions of violence.

In the late 1950s, there was widespread unrest when the French banned the main party opposed to colonial rule, the popular Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC), leading to a bloody and protracted guerrilla war that resulted in 15 years (1956 - 1971) to dozens of thousands - if not hundreds of thousands - of deaths. France granted independence in 1960, but the insurgency persisted. President Ahmadou Ahidjo used it as a pretext to declare a state of emergency, take full executive powers and fend off calls for a national conference to decide on post-independence political arrangements. Following a UN-sponsored referendum in 1961, the southern region of British-controlled Anglophone Cameroon voted to rejoin Francophone Cameroon, while the northern region voted to remain with Nigeria.

With a weak negotiating team, Anglophone Cameroon allowed Ahidjo to impose a constitution that, while formally federal, had all the hallmarks of a French-style centralized state. It did little more than adjust the 1960 constitution of French Cameroon and allowed for direct election of the president, which Ahidjo correctly calculated would reinforce his position. There were few guarantees to enact what was to be, on paper, a "union of equal parts". The resulting frustrations linger today in Anglophone Cameroon.

By the late 1960s the civil war in the west Bamileke region was ending, but the regime was still obsessed with unity and stability. It was autocratic, and it considered pluralism and diversity unacceptable threats to the nation-building project.

The resignation of President Ahidjo in November 1982, and the handover of power to his prime minister, Paul Biya, initially went smoothly. But tensions soon emerged, culminating in a coup attempt in April 1984, blamed on Ahidjo loyalists. It was violently put down, with no process of reconciliation to follow. The trauma of this period is still a source of bitterness for many from the north, Ahidjo's home area. Equally, some from the south, including in the security forces, fear reprisals stemming from the unfinished business of 1984.

In the early 1990s, opposition parties emerged, and multi-party elections were held. The regime was seriously threatened at the ballot box and in the street, and frustrations led to widespread violence in 1991. But President Biya and his ruling party prevailed and started to restore authoritarian rule behind a façade of democratic practice.

Today, the nation-building project has frayed, as the economy has stagnated, and unemployment and inequality have risen. The economy is weighed down by corruption, a poor business climate and the low price of oil, production of which constitutes 10 per cent of GDP. The population benefits very little from what economic growth there has been, based mainly on natural resources exploitation. Opposition forces are weak, and popular anger is very high.

### **What is happening?**

The country now faces violence in three regions: the Northwest and Southwest, where an Anglophone insurgency emerged in late 2017, and the Far North, where Boko Haram continues to mount small-scale attacks. The current crisis is the most serious and bloody internal conflict the country has known since the civil war of the 1960s. Added to this is a rampant insecurity and refugee crisis in the East and Adamaoua, which host some 236,000 people from the Central African Republic. Elections in October 2018 will be a major test, as will the eventual transfer of power away from the aging President Biya.

#### *Armed Insurgency in the Anglophone Regions*

The crisis in the Anglophone regions is now a deadly armed insurgency. While there are hardliners among the militants, the government bears a large share of the responsibility for the conflict. It failed to recognize legitimate Anglophone grievances; its security forces committed widespread abuses; and it imprisoned many peaceful activists in early 2017.

Several small "self-defense" groups now operate alongside a couple of larger armed groups: the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) and the Ambazonia self-defense Council. The armed separatist groups aggregate more than 500 active members and fighters, equipped with hunting homemade guns and modern assault rifles (AK47 and Kalashnikovs). They grow month after month and now control several portions of rural territories. Since November 2017, these groups have launched a series of attacks against military and police barracks that have killed at least 90 members of security forces, three times the number of soldiers and policemen killed in the Far North during the same period. An unknown number of separatist fighters have died in these clashes though (some military officers estimated 200 armed separatists have been killed).

The military crackdown also involved significant human rights violations. According to the International Crisis Group, security forces have killed at least 150 civilians since November 2016 and burned dozens of villages. Several Cameroonian NGO have estimated to several hundred the civilians killed and 70 the villages destroyed by security forces. Around a thousand Anglophone activists or presumed separatists have been arrested, with 500 still in jail. 34,000 Anglophones are refugees in Nigeria and some 160,000 are internally displaced. Armed Anglophone militants have also killed more than a dozen civilians (termed "black legs"), suspected of collaborating with the Cameroonian

security services, and have burnt dozens of schools, with the aim to enforce their school boycott strategy. As result, schools are being disrupted in Anglophone areas since November 2016.

The government's refusal to launch a dialogue with peaceful Anglophone leaders has corroded the community's trust in state institutions and provoked escalating violence. A direct dialogue between the government and Anglophone community leaders (from pro decentralization to federalists and separatists) is critical to de-escalate the crisis. A wider conversation, which should include discussion of different models of federalism and effective decentralization (or regionalism such as in Germany), is also important, given the failings of the current model. The U.S. should take advantage of the government's concern about its international image and desire to preserve cooperation with them to nudge it toward direct talks and a national dialogue.

#### *Boko Haram: still a threat to the neglected Far North*

Since 2014, Boko Haram has killed about 1,900 Cameroonian civilians and 200 soldiers and gendarmes, as well as burned and looted dozens of villages. The conflict also has displaced some 242,000 people, driven 91,000 of them to neighboring Nigeria and badly disrupted the local economy. Though battered by security forces and riven by internal divisions, Boko Haram could regain strength if Cameroonian authorities—overstretched by the growing insurgency in the Anglophone regions—neglect the crisis.

The war against Boko Haram has strained local communities, given rise to humanitarian crises and highlighted the need for longer-term development. The immediate challenge is to stimulate the local economy without filling the coffers of Boko Haram, which taxes local trade and in the past has recruited in part by offering small business loans and other financial incentives. Achieving the right balance will be difficult. But support for small businesses within the formal and informal economies could undercut local backing for Boko Haram. Separately, while Yaounde has long controlled the Far North by co-opting local notables, Boko Haram's spread into Cameroon was partly facilitated by tapping into anger at local elites. Instead, the U.S. should encourage the state to reassert its presence in the north in a participatory and inclusive manner rather than through proxies, including via development projects that boost local earning potential.

The last six months, issues have emerged concerning how to deal with about 200 surrendering Boko Haram members or associates, at present the subject of only piecemeal policies. The government should elaborate a coherent de-radicalization and reinsertion strategy as well as a transitional justice program for those surrendering. We encourage more and better thought through national and international support on this issue. In the same line the decrease of the Far North conflict raises the question of the screening and DDR of the 12.000 members of vigilante groups (local self-defence groups) that were mobilized to support the security forces in the fight against Boko Haram.

#### *The Elections and an Eventual Transition from President Biya*

The 2018 elections are likely to see Biya and the ruling party retain power, but polls seen as manipulated or unfair would make it even more remote from citizens and feed greater levels of violence. Election season will be an especially risky time if, as appears likely, Anglophone militants attempt to disrupt the balloting in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and possibly elsewhere. Several political parties are designing strategy to “protect and defend” their votes, while some civil society movements are planning to boycott the elections and to express their discontent in October in the streets of Yaoundé and Douala, hoping to build momentum for a popular uprising, such as occurred in Burkina Faso.

Because so much power is vested in the president and most government institutions are weak, an additional concern is the risk of major instability if the president dies or is incapacitated. The U.S. and other actors should start laying the groundwork for a peaceful transfer of power; the longer the situation deteriorates, the harder it will be to pick up the pieces. It should do so first, by supporting dialogue between the government and Anglophone leaders, as described above; and, second, by working with Cameroon's electoral commission and deploying election observers to protect the integrity of the vote, and by pushing in the best scenario for comprehensive governance and electoral

reform before the elections in October, and thus build confidence in the electoral system. In the worst scenario, the U.S should push for negotiations to at least obtain a ceasefire in the Anglophone regions during the voting week - that will probably require some government concessions such as the liberation of Anglophone detainees-, and some feasible minimal reforms of the electoral code: adoption of a single ballot paper, of a two rounds polls and a fair funding of political parties. Even small gains in these areas would help mend the torn contract between the Cameroonian state and its citizens.

### **What can Congress and U.S Do?**

The U.S. Congress should urge President Biya to pursue a peaceful solution to the Anglophone crisis and end abuses by security forces that are fueling the insurgency. More could be done to help rebuild the Far North and prevent Boko Haram from returning in force. Last, but not least, it should help protect the integrity of Cameroon's October elections.

#### *The Anglophone Crisis*

- Press the Cameroonian government to allow credible independent investigations by the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms in conjunction with an international body like the U.N or A.U into allegations of abuses by security forces and punish those responsible. Reexamine defense cooperation, development aid and examine sanction against top security officials and administrative authorities involved in these abuses, if it does not do so.
- Continue to urge the government to pursue dialogue with Anglophone leaders and not reflexively oppose any discussion of federalism. Help identify a neutral mediator, potentially the Catholic Church, to help break the dangerous stalemate.

#### *Combating Boko Haram*

- Provide more support to the humanitarian crisis and rebuilding of the Far North. But also require Cameroon to do more to stabilize the Far North. Support international assistance to Cameroonian government efforts.
- Urge the Cameroonian government to tackle the post conflict demobilization of the vigilante units, as well as the deradicalization and reintegration of ex Boko Haram members. Support efforts of the Cameroonian government in that direction.

#### *Elections*

- Sustain international support and attention to the elections. Cameroonian elites are sensitive to outsiders' judgment and their image abroad. Congress and the U.S. Administration should be positioned to intervene with one voice. The U.S and other Ambassadors in Yaoundé should coordinate their positions. This should also be done at the capital level. Try to expand pressure groups from just the "West" to include other democracies and concerned countries from the South.
- Continue to privately and publicly encourage president Biya to think about his legacy.

