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The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon –
historical and political background

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Cameroon: Legacies of violence and prospects for peace. New impulses from research

Responding to a growing need to anchor the analysis of current violent crises in historical perspectives, the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI) in Freiburg organized a workshop on 16 and 17 June 2021 that had to be held as a webinar due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies on Cameroon slowly begin to expand (again). Academic and non-academic interest has been growing recently - mostly due to the "Anglophone crisis" which is clearly the focus of the mini-series of Working Papers proposed here. During the workshop, eight papers were presented and discussed; offering food for thought to a broad audience of quite different disciplinary backgrounds.

Compared to other African countries of approximately the same size, Cameroon's violent history has for a long time received at best a fair share, but certainly not high scholarly attention. Recently, a good number of Ph.D. and larger research projects have been started and some of the webinar's participants are themselves active in creating international networks of researchers. Some of those individuals, both senior and junior, used the opportunity to share their research results and discuss promising avenues for further research.

The conference organizers identified a number of gaps in the academic literature on Cameroon's legacy of violence. These include e.g., the general lack of a gender-lens on violence and contestation; the underrepresentation of the British UN mandate period, although more archival material should be available today; and the absence of a comparative perspective on Cameroon as an example of 'state failure', arguably because the current violence is still regarded as below the level of a 'major crisis'.

Other under-researched angles to the current Anglophone conflict have been addressed by the papers in this mini-series – all inspired by the 2021 workshop at ABI. These include the underrepresented perspectives of the pastoralist Mbororo ethnic minority (Pelican et al.); the situation of Anglophone youths displaced to the Far North, which in itself is a conflict region due to persistent insurgencies of Boko Haram (Adama); and the little-known self-perception of the separatist fighters and their emic understanding of the rightful use of force (Willis et al.). Digging deeper into the history, consequences and lateral aspects of the current violent conflict between Anglophone separatists and the government remains an important task, and the contributions of the mini-series provide exactly this

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The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon – historical and political background

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Abstract:

This paper introduces the mini-series of ABI working papers addressing the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon (Adama 2022; Pelican et al. 2022; Willis et al. 2023). The conflict erupted in late 2017 after one-year-long peaceful protests for the representation of the British colonial heritage in Cameroon's English-speaking regions had been met with state violence. In the five years since, guerrilla warfare between Cameroonian state forces and Anglophone separatist groups has led to the death of over 6000 persons and the displacement of an estimated 765,000 (ICG 2022).² The papers in this series are empirically informed and illuminate different experiences from within the conflict. The article by Roxana Willis, Caroline Mbinkar and James Angove is based on interviews with civilians and separatist fighters and interrogates the motives and moral codes that guide the separatists' use of violence. Michaela Pelican, Kim Schumann, Sina Plücken and David Drew study the conflict's impact on the Mbororo ethnic minority in the Anglophone North West region, and the role of the diaspora and social media in fuelling or mitigating the situation. The paper of Ousmanou Adama focuses on the coping strategies of Anglophone youths who have been internally displaced to the Far North, a region that since 2013 has been gravely affected by Boko Haram insurgencies and has become both a source and destination of internal and transborder displacement. In their diversity, the three papers make a joint contribution to the subject of conflict studies: They illustrate that there is no comprehensive or neutral narrative on the Anglophone conflict, its causes, or effects, but rather a collection of highly contextual and positioned narratives that are, at times, incompatible with each other, yet each

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² These are the latest estimates provided by the International Crisis Group on their website, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon> (accessed August 9, 2022). Yet, numbers vary by source. For example, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported for August 2022 that 592,600 persons have been internally displaced, 77,400 have taken refuge in Nigeria and 417,500 have returned to the conflict regions (OCHA 2022b).

in their own right. To place the different voices in context, this introductory article provides the necessary historical and political background to the current conflict.

Introduction

The central African country of Cameroon is currently affected by a civil conflict between Cameroonian state forces and Anglophone separatist groups. The latter seek political independence of the State of Ambazonia, or the so-called Southern Cameroons in reference to the British colonial period, which is home to the Anglophone minority of the country, mostly located in the North West and South West administrative regions. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2017, over 6000 persons have been killed and about 765,000 have been displaced (ICG 2022). This article has the following aims: Provide an informed understanding of the Anglophone conflict and its historical roots; identify the main parties and how they view their role in the conflict; consider some of the measures initiated by the Cameroonian government and the international community to resolve the conflict.

No historical account is neutral. In this case, my review of the Anglophone conflict has been informed by my interest in the situation of the Mbororo ethnic group as well as my familiarity with the works of Roxana Willis and Ousmanou Adama, whose papers form part of this thematic mini-series of ABI working papers. For this article, I draw on a variety of sources, including analyses of the Anglophone conflict authored by historians, political scientists and anthropologists. Furthermore, I take inspiration from my experience as a researcher present in Cameroon during several decisive moments of the Anglophone conflict and its precursors.³ I am clearly biased toward a pro-Anglophone minority perspective, as most of my research has been conducted in the English-speaking part of the country, and I have developed a profound familiarity with and sympathy for the plight of Anglophone Cameroonians over the past thirty years. At the same time, I have an ambivalent perspective on the conflict, as I have seen the Anglophone movement operate in a peaceful manner over many years, and am deeply concerned about the distressing consequences of the current violent conflict. I have

³ I was in Cameroon from 1991 to 1993, 1996, 2008, 2010 to 2011, 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2022, and am most familiar with the Anglophone North West region. In particular, I lived through the political turbulences of the early 1990s and witnessed the rise of the Southern Cameroons National Council. I was present in October 2016 when the first protests took place, and in the summer of 2018 when the Mbororo ethnic minority became a target of extreme speech and subsequent assaults (see also Pelican et al. 2022).

noticed that even though comparable civil disobedience has occurred in Cameroon during the 1990s, and the government then and now reacted with disproportionate force, earlier protests did not escalate into the current scope of violence. Arguably, the present conflict dynamics have been aggravated by the regime's long decades of structural violence exerted on the Anglophone regions and its failure to generate viable visions for young Cameroonians' future. At the same time, I hold that the growing size of the Anglophone Cameroonian diaspora and access to social media are relevant factors to the changed conflict dynamics.⁴

A note on terminology: In this article, I prioritize "Anglophone conflict" over other terms frequently used in public and academic debates. I deliberately choose "conflict" over "crisis" to acknowledge the conflict's gravity and violent character. Most recently, the Cameroonian government has made attempts to reframe the conflict from *crise* or *question anglophone* to "North-West/South-West crisis", thus shifting the focus to the conflict's spatial dimensions and discrediting its identity political component.⁵ I take issue with this effort to de-politicize the conflict, and argue that the term "Anglophone" should not be read as a simple linguistic category. It is used here to refer to the conflict's complex historical and political dimensions, which will be elaborated on in the later part of this paper.

This article builds on and extends the existing research on the Anglophone conflict. On the one hand, the Cameroonian government has long denied the conflict, and the international community has been slow in recognizing and responding to it.⁶ On the other, numerous human rights organizations and political thinktanks have worked hard towards documenting the scale of atrocities and pressing the Cameroonian government to investigate the human rights abuses. These include Amnesty International, BBC Africa Eye, the Center for Human

⁴ The role of the diaspora and social media in the Anglophone conflict is also the subject of the doctoral research project of Kim Schumann, entitled "Keyboard Warriors: The Role of the Diaspora and Digital Media in the Cameroonian Anglophone Crisis" (see also Pelican et al. 2022).

⁵ This assessment is based on personal communication with diplomatic representatives and UN institutions during my recent stay in Cameroon (May 2022) who mentioned demands by the Cameroonian government to shift to "North-West/South-West crisis" in their official communication. Similarly, the UK Home Office (2020a, 2020b) changed its titling of the country policy and information note from "Cameroon: Anglophones" (version 1.0, March 2020) to "Cameroon: North-West/South-West crisis" (version 2.0, December 2020).

⁶ La Marche and Fox (2019) point out the detrimental consequences of the government's denial of the conflict and the international actors' unwillingness to address its humanitarian consequences. In a recent podcast, the International Crisis Group termed it "Cameroon's Forgotten Anglophone Conflict", thus highlighting the international community's recurrent disinterest in the conflict (ICG 2021).

Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group (ICG), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to name a few. In addition, several scholars have initiated research projects to study the ongoing conflict and its historical roots, document its effects on civilians and civil society actors and identify potential solutions for peace. Among them are the Cameroon Conflict Research Group based at the University of Oxford⁷; the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis Data Base of Atrocities hosted by the University of Toronto⁸; the collaborative research project “Voices from ‘Ground Zero’” of Coventry University and the African Leadership Center in Nairobi⁹; the International Human Rights Clinic of the University of Southern California¹⁰; the working group on the Anglophone conflict at the University of Cologne; and the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg which hosts this thematic mini-series of working papers¹¹. In addition to these coordinated programs, there have been many individual efforts, often by Cameroonian scholars based in-country or abroad, at tackling the Anglophone conflict from various thematic and disciplinary angles (e.g. Adama 2022; Bang and Balgah 2022; Nna-Emeka Okereke 2018; Nwati 2020; Takor 2018). While in this article, only a selected few will be referenced in regard to the topics addressed, I wish to acknowledge these authors’ important contributions, realized in the face of a volatile political environment and challenging research conditions.

⁷ The Cameroon Conflict Research Group is an interdisciplinary research team within the Faculty of Law at the University of Oxford. It investigates the Anglophone conflict with an eye on the causes of the conflict, the role of the international community, the perspectives of the conflict’s stakeholders, and possible routes to resolution. It has published several reports (Willis et al. 2019; 2020) and organized academic and policy events. <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/cameroon> (accessed August 9, 2022)

⁸ The Cameroon Anglophone Crisis Data Base of Atrocities invites individuals and organizations to upload audio-visual or textual documents about atrocities perpetuated from October 2016 to present in Cameroon’s Anglophone Regions. The project partners provide thoroughly researched reports on specific incidents which are accessible on the website of the database. <https://research.rotman.utoronto.ca/Cameroon/> (accessed August 9, 2022).

⁹ The project „Voices from ‘Ground Zero’: Interrogating History, Culture and Identity in the Resolution of Cameroon’s ‘Anglophone’ Conflict“ integrates researchers based at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations of Coventry University, the African Leadership Centre in Nairobi, and the University of Buea. It focuses on the role of civil society in conflict resolution and has produced several publications (Annan et al. 2021; Crawford et al. 2022; Kewir et al. 2021). <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2020/voices-from-ground-zero/> (accessed August 9, 2022)

¹⁰ The International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC) human rights scholars and student attorneys to engage in research and advocacy work on the Anglophone conflict. The Clinic has prepared factional and legal submissions to international organizations, the US congress, and the Canadian House of Commons, and is preparing a report on grave human rights abuses. <https://humanrightsclinic.usc.edu> (accessed August 9, 2022).

¹¹ As part of their Cameroon related activities, the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI) organized the workshop “Cameroon: Legacies of violence and prospects for peace. New impulses from research” on June 16 and 17, 2021 which inspired this thematic mini-series. <https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/projekte/cameroon-legacies-of-violence-and-prospects-for-peace-new-impulses-from-research> (accessed August 9, 2022).

The remaining part of this paper is structured in three parts: Section two will position the Anglophone conflict in relation to further challenges to national stability and the conflict's historical roots. Section three will introduce the warring parties and their perspectives on the conflict, including civil society organizations and the Anglophone diaspora. Section four will consider selected political measures of the Cameroonian government, such as the Major National Dialogue of 2018, and responses – or the lack thereof – of the international community in view of mitigating the conflict. The article will end with an outlook on the Anglophone conflict and the challenges for social science research in predicting violent conflict.

Cameroon today – a country riddled by conflict

Cameroon has long been known as a stable and peaceful country in a geopolitical environment riddled by insecurity, conflict and displacement. Today, Cameroon's stability is under threat with several hotspots in different parts of the country: the Anglophone conflict in the English-speaking North West and South West regions; the insurgencies of the Islamic militia Boko Haram in the country's Far North; and the refugee and transborder dynamics in the East region neighbouring the Central African Republic.

Cameroon's Anglophone regions have been in a state of unrest since late 2016. While the conflict has long historical roots, it was kindled by the peaceful protests of lawyers and teachers against the erosion of Cameroon's bi-jural and bi-educational systems, rooted in the country's French and British colonial legacy (Amin and Takougang 2018; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019; Pommerolle and Heungoup 2017). To these peaceful protests, the government responded with disproportionate force, and arrested and jailed some of the protesters whom they accused of terrorism. This generated new protests and violence and enabled advocates of secession to move from the periphery to the centre of the debate, both in Cameroon and in the diaspora. Since 2017, the Anglophone regions are in a state of civil war with regular encounters between the military and separatist forces that often lead to human rights violations against civilians. By 2022, over 6000 people have been killed (ICG 2022), 592,600 have been internally displaced, 77,400 have taken refuge in Nigeria and 417,500 have returned (OCHA 2022b). Less than 30% of schools in the North West and South West regions are operational and 700,000 children have been affected by school closure

(ACAPS 2021). 2.2 million of the North West and South West regions' population of approximately five million are in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2022a). The economy in the English-speaking regions has faltered and caused a significant drop in agricultural production. Thousands of jobs in the agricultural and service sectors have been lost, the regions' GDP has declined by more than 30%, and tax revenues of up to 800,000 USD annually are no longer applicable due to a 90% drop in imports from Nigeria (BTI 2020: 25; Kindzeka 2020; World Bank 2021: 45-49).

The Norwegian Refugee Council (2022) has recorded the conflict in Cameroon to be one of the most overlooked humanitarian crises in the world. Cameroon was twice ranked top of the list and subsequently moved to the second and third positions. Three criteria are used to rank a selection of 40 crises in total: lack of international political will; lack of media attention; and lack of economic support. What this means is that the suffering of Cameroonians due to the multiple political crises in their country has not only been widely ignored in international headlines and diplomacy, but that donor countries have also not invested adequately into meeting people's basic needs. This is mirrored in the reports of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which regularly number the humanitarian aid provided by the international community to be lower than the estimated basic needs.¹² Adama's article (2022) provides a qualitative assessment of the grave effects of the conflict and its neglect on the educational, social, and economic prospects of internally displaced youths. Their motivation to take refuge in the Far North, another zone of violent conflict, speaks to the seriousness of the humanitarian situation.

Besides the political tensions in the Anglophone regions, the Far North, and the East, Cameroon is facing a third looming, and possibly the most disruptive, crisis for its nation state, namely the impending succession of Paul Biya who is the longest ruling president (since 1982) and oldest head of state in Africa (born 1933). The presidential succession has long been a political taboo subject and has repeatedly produced post-electoral protests that were met with drastic regime responses. Political tensions between Biya and the main opposition leader, Maurice Kamto, emerged after the latest presidential election in 2018, and have taken

¹² By August 2021, for example, OCHA had succeeded to raise 25% of the required 361.6 million USD required to realize the Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan 2021 (OCHA 2021); for a detailed breakdown, see also the report of the OCHA Financial Tracking Service on Cameroon (OCHA n.d.).

ethnic dimensions, further intensified by extreme speech circulated on social media (ICG 2020). The government's seeming inertia and privacy over Biya's succession aggravate the existing conflict dynamics.

I argue that, given the complex scenario of multiple hotspots in different parts of the country, the Anglophone conflict is of particular relevance. It involves a range of identifiable actors on the side of the government, the separatist movements, the international community, the diaspora and civil society. Even though a political solution still seems far away, some of these are qualified and actively engaged in finding ways to end violence and restore peace. Thus, the process of negotiating a solution to the Anglophone conflict may shine a light on possible ways forward in the country's multiple conflict scenarios.¹³

Historical roots of the Anglophone conflict

In the following, I will discuss a selection of historical events relevant to the country's governance structure that have been crucial to the Anglophone conflict and to demands for secession (see illustration 1). For this section, I will draw on the comprehensive analyses of Konings and Nyamnjoh (1997, 2003, 2019) who have published widely on the topic, foregrounding the perspectives of English-speaking Cameroonians.

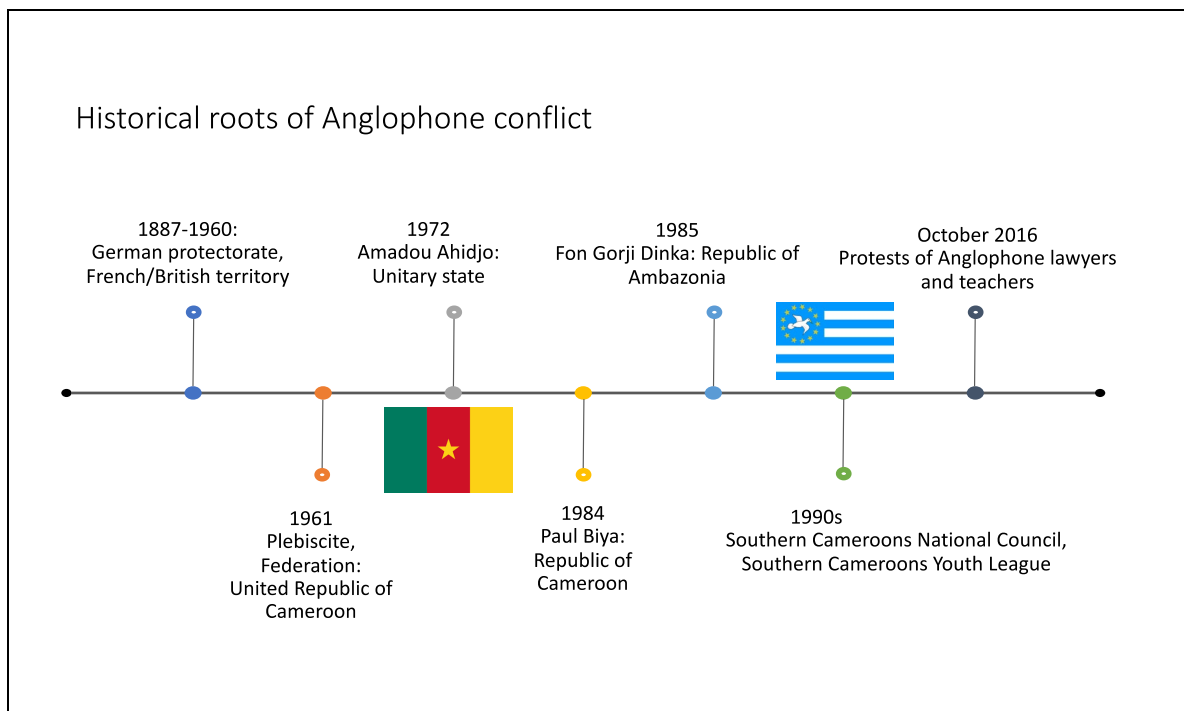
The English-speaking minority in Cameroon accounts for approximately 20% (five million) of the country's overall population of around 25.5 million (UK Home Office 2020b: 15). They are concentrated in the North West and South West, the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon's ten administrative regions; a good number also live in the country's major cities, such as Bafoussam, Douala and Yaoundé.

The current Anglophone crisis has its historical roots in Cameroon's tripartite colonial history, in particular its partitioning between the French and British after the First World War (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997, 2003, 2019). While about 80% of the former German colony was placed under French mandate, 20% were entrusted to the British. This period lasted from 1916 to 1960 and provided the historical, political and spatial basis for the construction of

¹³ My assessment of the Anglophone conflict's relevance has been inspired by conversations with diplomatic representatives and UN institutions during my latest stay in Cameroon (May 2022).

Francophone and Anglophone identities. As Konings and Nyamnjuh argue, “[t]he populations in each region came to see themselves as distinct communities defined by differences in language and inherited colonial traditions of education, law, and public administration” (Konings and Nymanjoh 2019: 61-62; see also Kah 2012). While French Cameroon was administered as a distinct unit, British Cameroons – consisting of a Southern and a Northern part – was administered as an integral part of the Eastern region of Nigeria.

Illustration 1: Historical roots of Anglophone conflict



Source: Michaela Pelican, based on Konings & Nyamnjuh 2019

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In 1960, French Cameroon became independent and was named the Republic of Cameroon. With Nigeria becoming independent the same year, the British trust territory of the Northern and Southern Cameroons was given the opportunity to decide its own political future in February 1961 in an UN-organized plebiscite. Only two options were provided: to remain with Nigeria or to reunite with Francophone Cameroon. A third alternative of forming an independent British Cameroons was considered unviable by the UK and the UN and thus ruled out as an option (Willis et al. 2019: 11). While Northern Cameroons decided to join Nigeria, Southern Cameroons opted for a federation with independent Francophone Cameroon, now under the rule of President Ahmadou Ahidjo. However, the newly formed Federal Republic of

Cameroon, consisting of Anglophone West Cameroon and Francophone East Cameroon, did not endure. In 1972 Ahidjo abolished the federal system and instituted a highly centralized, unitary state; an act that Anglophones attributed to the desire of the Francophone political elite to “dominate the Anglophone minority and erase the cultural and institutional foundations of Anglophone identity” (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019: 66).

In 1982, Paul Biya took over power from Ahidjo and introduced a limited degree of liberalism. Two years later, he changed the country’s official name from the “United Republic of Cameroon” to simply the “Republic of Cameroon”. This earned him much resentment among the Anglophone population who read it as a measure to reinforce Anglophone assimilation into the Francophone-dominated state. In 1985, the Anglophone lawyer and first president of the Cameroon Bar Association, Fon Gorji Dinka addressed a memorandum to President Biya, denying him the right to unilaterally secede from the union, and calling for the former Southern Cameroons to become independent. This was the first time, the name “Ambazonia” – derived from Ambaz Bay at the foot of Mount Cameroon – was introduced to refer to an envisioned independent Anglophone Cameroon.

The calls for independence and secession intensified during the 1990s, a period characterized by economic and political liberalization and the re-introduction of a multiparty system. Anglophone interests came to be represented by associations and pressure groups initiated by Anglophone elites, such as the All Anglophone Conference (AAC), which organized two major meetings in 1993 and 1994, and called for a return to the federal form of state. When the government did not respond to their demands, the Anglophone leadership embraced a secessionist stance. They formed the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and declared October 1, 1996 the date of independence of Southern Cameroons. In contrast to the current secessionist movement, the AAC and SCNC strictly advocated for peaceful negotiations. They successfully sought recognition of Anglophone grievances by international bodies, such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, but failed to gain support for their secessionist claims. The idea of an independent Southern Cameroons was also promoted by Anglophone university students who could draw on earlier experiences of protest action (Konings 2005). Motivated by long years of marginalization in the Francophone-dominated university system, they formed the

Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL) to serve as the militant youth wing of the SCNC. In sharp contrast to the peaceful strategies of the Anglophone elite, the SCYL opted for armed struggle and planned attacks against military and civil establishments. They were soon identified and violently counteracted by the Cameroonian government, with several of its members being arrested, killed or forced into exile. Some have resurfaced as vital actors in the current Anglophone crisis.¹⁴

An important feature of the democratization period of the 1990s was the degree of civil disobedience exercised by the population in support of the political opposition. For example, in 1991-1992 over a period of more than nine months, the population of the North West, South West, West and Littoral regions realized so-called Ghost Town campaigns/*operation villes mortes* and effectively halted economic life in an attempt to force the government to hold a sovereign national conference (Konings 2005; Mbu 1993). The Ghost Town campaigns involved the voluntary closing of businesses, shops and taxi services, and the refusal to pay government taxes. I first arrived in Cameroon in October 1991, when the Ghost Town campaigns had taken full swing. I also witnessed the presidential elections in October 1992 and lived through the subsequent state of emergency that was imposed on the North West and South West regions and lasted for three months. The government's approach to the current Anglophone conflict strongly resonates with the measures adopted by the Biya regime at the time.

While the Anglophone cause enjoyed full support among the English-speaking population in the early 1990s, it lost its momentum in the subsequent years. The country's economic situation was deteriorating since the late 1980s as a result of structural adjustment programs imposed by international donors. Moreover, with the repeated re-election of Paul Biya, both the political opposition and the Anglophone population gradually lost hope in any meaningful political and economic change. This resulted in a general political lethargy and motivated many Anglophone Cameroonians to leave the country and look for more promising opportunities in Europe, the US and elsewhere (Jua 2003; Pelican 2013). It was only twenty years later, that the Anglophone cause acquired new impetus.

¹⁴ Personal information by a former political activist, interviewed by Michaela Pelican (December 2019).

The beginnings of the Anglophone conflict

It all started in October 2016 with the peaceful protests of Common Law lawyers and Anglophone teachers against the growing number of Francophone judges and teachers posted to the English-speaking regions; this was perceived as a deliberate government attempt to undermine the so-called *Anglo-Saxon* (emic term) legal and educational system (Amin and Takougang 2018; Pommerolle and Heungoup 2017). To strengthen their bargaining power, the protesters founded the Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) which foregrounded the need for political dialogue and demanded a return to federalism. The movement soon gained grassroots support, drawing the youths to the streets, who found a valve to express their disgruntlement with the government's failure to invest in development, infrastructure, and job creation in the Anglophone regions. Drawing on tactics of civil disobedience previously exercised in the 1990s, such as school boycotts and the temporary halt of economic activities (Operation Ghost Town), public life in the Anglophone regions was effectively disrupted (Nna-Emeka Okereke 2018).

The Biya regime responded with indignation and police force to the Anglophone protests: Spokespersons of the government denied the validity of Anglophone grievances and publicly derided protestors. In Buea, the capital of the South West region, peaceful demonstrators and university students were humiliated, maltreated and arrested, and at least two protestors were killed. By coincidence, I was in Bamenda, the capital of the North West region, when protests emerged in response to a political rally of President Biya's ruling party, and two young protesters were killed. The city was immediately flooded with the military, and the population was put under house arrest for several days.

When the government eventually responded to the demands of the Anglophone population, the feasibility of meaningful dialogue had faded. In early 2017, the CACSC was banned and its leadership arrested. This resulted in a political void, soon filled by more radical voices; with some based in Cameroon, others in the diaspora. Many Anglophones had left Cameroon after the political disappointment of the 1990s to live in Europe, the US, South Africa and Nigeria, including former SCNC members and SCYL militants. With their voices gaining centre stage, the movement's goal shifted from federalism to secession. Different factions emerged,

ranging from advocates of a more peaceful approach to those in support of the violent struggle.

On October 1, 2017, a consortium of Anglophone opposition groups, later named the Ambazonia Interim Government (AIG), declared the independence of Anglophone Cameroon. They called their aspired nation Ambazonia in reference to Gorji Dinka and the region's militant struggle of the 1990s. This event significantly altered the conflict dynamics: As it called into question the integrity of the Republic of Cameroon, President Biya responded by declaring war on the separatists and by dispatching heavy military and special forces to the Anglophone regions. Until today, military intervention is the government's prime strategy to deal with the Anglophone conflict, with severe consequences for the civilian population.

The warring parties in the violent conflict

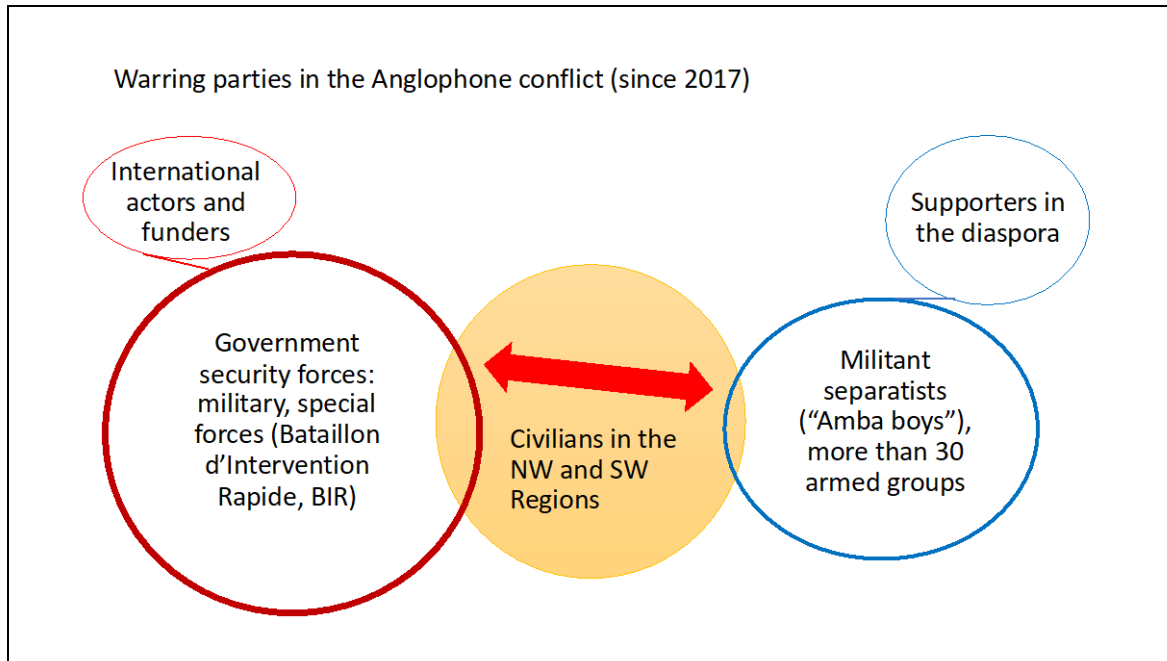
The warring parties in this violent conflict are, on the one hand, the security forces of the Cameroonian government; on the other are separatist militias that comprise more than 30 armed groups (ICG 2019). Civilians often find themselves caught in the middle between the warring parties (see illustration 2). Their experiences and assessment of the sources of danger, however, may differ, depending on how they are positioned in relation to the conflicting parties.

From the start, President Biya sought a military solution to end the conflict. From the perspective of the Cameroonian government, the separatists are terrorists that threaten the unity and security of the country. To get control over the situation, the government initiated several measures, such as imposing curfews, controlling international money transfers, and shutting down or throttling the internet (Gwagwa 2018). Entire villages have been razed to the ground by the government forces, and thousands of people have been killed or injured in skirmishes between the warring parties.¹⁵ As a result of the concerted violence, many

¹⁵ BBC Africa Eye (2018) thoroughly researched and documented the burning of villages and acts of torture and killing in the Anglophone conflict; they applied forensic methods and geolocating technologies to verify audio-visual material circulated on social media. Most recently, Amnesty International (2021) used similar methods in reconstructing the destruction of villages in Cameroon's North West.

Anglophones were pressured into leaving the conflict zone and seeking refuge in Francophone regions or in neighbouring Nigeria (see also Adama 2022).

Illustration 2: Warring parties in the Anglophone conflict (since 2017)¹⁶



Source: Michaela Pelican

Among the most severe atrocities committed by state forces was the Ngarbuh massacre of February 2020, in which 21 civilians (including 14 children and a pregnant woman) were killed. A few days after the incident, Human Rights Watch published a detailed report on the military's involvement in the massacre. This caught the attention of the United Nations and put pressure on the Cameroonian government to investigate the atrocities, for which it eventually assumed responsibility in April 2020 (HRW 2020a). Lekunze (2019: 86) partly attributes the human rights abuses committed by the security forces to the under-training and under-resourcing of the Cameroonian army, which he sees as a deliberate strategy of the regime to avoid the possibility of a *coup d'état*. He points out the incompetence, low morale and poor execution of military operations that have also been documented for the

¹⁶ In my illustration of the warring parties (illustration 2), I have included the Anglophone diaspora and the international community as possible supportive parties to the Anglophone conflict. I want to point out, however, that the role of international actors in funding and training the state army is ambiguous. On the one hand, their contribution can be read as a continuation of colonial structures and as facilitating state violence (e.g. Mehler 2022; Willis et al. 2020). On the other, military training may be aimed at professionalizing the armed forces and their interaction with civilians to reduce indiscriminate violence and human rights abuses (personal communication with diplomatic representatives, Yaoundé, May 2022).

government's counter-insurgency against Boko Haram in the Far North.¹⁷ While Lekunze's argument is well-founded, we should also consider the special role of the Rapid Intervention Brigade (Brigade d'Intervention Rapide, BIR). They are an elite army unit that has been trained and equipped as counter-terrorism force by the US, UK and Israel. Different from the ordinary army, they are under the direct command of the president (Lekunze 2019: 85). In several instances, human rights abuses have been attributed to the BIR, including in the Ngarbuh massacre.

On the other side of the conflict are the separatist fighters, locally known as "Amba boys". Their perspective is starkly different from that of the Cameroonian government. They see themselves as freedom fighters who defend independent Ambazonia, its territory and population, against the intrusion of the Francophone aggressor, whom they call *la République*. They largely draw their members from the large segment of disgruntled Anglophone youths who have lost family to violent military interventions, and many of whom feel abject by the Biya regime and without future in the Francophone-dominated formal labour market. Relatively little is known about the organizational structures of the separatist forces. Some insight has been provided by Willis and her co-authors (2023) as well as by the independent journalist Emmanuel Freudenthal who in 2018 spent a week with a group of the Ambazonia Defense Force (ADF) (Freudenthal 2018, 2018a).

The International Crisis Group (ICG 2019: 2, 32-33) listed seven major armed militias with an estimated membership of 2,000 to 4,000 combatants, and noted another 20 smaller groups with localized purviews. Their strategies include closing government schools which they see as symbols of the Francophone state; imposing lockdowns to disrupt public life; targeting state agents and combatting security forces; and punishing individuals suspected of collaboration with the government (so-called *blacklegs*). Furthermore, they have engaged in acts of kidnapping for ransom, for which they have targeted traditional rulers, middle-class

¹⁷ In 2018, BBC Africa Eye analyzed a video that circulated on social media and showed the killing of two women and children at close range by Cameroonian soldiers. Drawing on forensic methods, they were able to identify the probable location in Cameroon's Far North, the approximate time of the incident that took place in 2015, and the identity of three of the soldiers involved. While the Cameroonian government initially discarded the video as "fake news", it was compelled by international pressure and the proof provided by BBC Africa Eye to investigate the military's role in the incident. This resulted in four Cameroonian soldiers being sentenced to ten years in prison for being responsible for the killing and a fifth soldier sentenced to two years for filming and sharing the footage of the incident (BBC Africa Eye 2020).

Anglophones and Mbororo graziers (HRW 2021; see also Pelican et al. 2022). As these developments suggest, the Anglophone conflict has increasingly taken on the character of a market of violence (Elwert 1999) in which separatist leaders act as warlords and use violence to create an economic basis for survival (see also Nwati 2020). Among the major atrocities attributed to separatist militias are several attacks on schools, including the Kumba school massacre in October 2020, in which seven students were killed and 13 injured (HRW 2020).

Violent acts against civilians committed by any party in the conflict are reprehensible. But as Willis and her co-authors (2020) emphasize, the warring parties differ significantly in the extent, motivation and intensity of violence exerted. The atrocities committed by the Cameroonian security forces are much more extensive and systematic than those of the separatists. Against this background, Willis and her co-authors decidedly argue against drawing moral equivalence between the atrocities committed by the military and the separatists, as it “empowers the Cameroon state to commit further crimes with impunity” (Willis et al. 2020: 34). Furthermore, they point out that among the rural population, the separatists enjoy strong grassroots support, while government forces are viewed as the main source of harassment and indiscriminate violence. This perspective needs to be relativized, as it contrasts with the assessment of members of the Mbororo ethnic minority, whose voices are foregrounded in the article by Pelican and her co-authors (2022).

An additional relevant actor in the conflict is diaspora Cameroonians who provide ideological, organizational, and financial support for the Anglophone cause, and who connect with the separatist forces via social media. To their part, I turn next.

The role of the diaspora and social media

At the time of writing about the Anglophone crisis, Konings and Nyamnjoh (2019) did not foresee the conflict to take a violent turn.¹⁸ Their assessment was based on the peaceful

¹⁸ While the book was published in 2019, the final version of the chapter by Konings and Nyamnjoh was submitted in April 2017 (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019: 81), which explains their somewhat optimistic assessment at the time. Their example confirms, once more, the difficulties social scientists face in predicting future turns in conflict settings. With regard to Cameroon, Philip Burnham (1996) already erred when ending his excellent study on interethnic relations and conflict in northern Cameroon with a rather bleak and violent vision of the future which, fortunately, did not materialize. Learning from the experiences of Burnham (1996) and Konings and

manifestations of the Anglophone movements of the 1990s and was endorsed by the statement of an SCNC member: „With no money, no foreign support, no arms, little grassroots support and most of the fighting and activism taking place on the Internet instead of on the ground, are we not wasting our time?“ (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019: 83). But the political fighting soon transcended the virtual space and produced offshoots on the ground, thus leading to the intricate connection of online and offline warfare.

With a significant number of Anglophone Cameroonians living abroad, the diaspora has contributed heavily to the separatist movement by raising funds, coordinating communication, and lobbying for international political support. Diasporic separatist leaders set up communication platforms, including satellite TV channels, websites and social media networks, to report about the crisis, inform public opinion, and guide militant interventions (Nganji and Cockburn 2020). In addition, some of the larger militias have their leadership abroad with whom they communicate via social media. Yet, as ICG (2019) points out, several militias, originally funded by the Anglophone diaspora, have resorted to coercing financial support from the civilian population and to kidnapping for ransom, and thus have achieved relative autonomy from their leadership abroad. Nonetheless, Cameroonians in the diaspora still seem heavily involved in the conflict, as repeated charges of gun smuggling and conspiracy against diaspora Cameroonians in the US suggest (Bagnetto 2021; Kom 2022).

Media, both new and old, have played a crucial role in facilitating the conflict, and have been deployed as channels of communication and mass mobilization by both, the Cameroonian government and the separatist forces. The government mainly relies on mass media, such as television, radio and newspapers, to disseminate its narratives and negate the conflict. Attempts at framing public opinion are evident, for example, in the government’s tight control over the public media sector.¹⁹ Conversely, the Anglophone opposition has capitalized on internet-based communication channels, such as satellite TV and social media. They have used social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube, to disseminate information and organize protest action (Miller et al. 2021: 192; see also Nganji

Nyamnjoh (2019), I prefer to refrain from further predictions of conflict development and stay with the assumption that Cameroon will hold surprise moments that may support either conflict mitigation or escalation.
¹⁹ There are indications that the government is venturing into online communication channels and, allegedly, is hiring people to leave troll comments and spread government-friendly opinions (I thank Kim Schumann for this information).

& Cockburn 2020). Furthermore, texts, images and voice messages have been circulated on mobile phones, linking Anglophones based in Cameroon and in the diaspora. As Agwanda et al. (2020) argue, social media have also been used to fuel violence: “The diaspora groups have been using social media platforms to galvanize other Anglophone Cameroonians to support the armed separatists using financial donations through campaigns such as “Adopt a Freedom Fighter” for a monthly minimum of \$75 or the “Feed the Nchang Shoe Boys” (WACC 2019)” (Agwanda et al. 2020: 7-8).²⁰

The government soon recognized the power of the internet and social media, and in January 2017, imposed a three-months internet shut-down. This was followed by intermittent throttling and temporary shutdowns, adding up to a total of more than 230 days without internet over a period of 14 months. This has earned Cameroon the reputation of instituting the longest internet shutdown in Africa besides Chad (Marchand and Strelau 2019). According to ICG (2020), the internet and social media have also become a playing field for political rivalries between President Biya and the opposition candidate Kamto, who draws support from the Bamiléké ethnic group of the West region, both based in Cameroon and in the diaspora. These social media exchanges have taken on unsettling dimensions, as misinformation and extreme speech have been spread, potentially fuelling ethnic tensions and violence. To counter the rise of extreme speech on social media, the Cameroonian government issued a law in December 2019 that criminalises inflammatory language against ethnic groups, which complements the cybersecurity legislation of 2010. ICG (2020) expresses reasonable doubts about the impartial and effective application of the law as well as the government's capacity to control social media. I argue that these recent measures are a clear indication of the relevance of social media and the Anglophone and Francophone diaspora in transforming national politics and conflict dynamics. Extreme speech circulated via social media also plays a significant role in the Mbororo case, explored by Pelican and her co-authors (2022).

²⁰ Other examples are websites such as “R2P The Big Rubber Gun” that offered stylized catapults and accessories at exalted prizes, while featuring the Ambazonian flag (<https://bigrubbergun.com>). Interestingly, the website is no longer available since I last visited it in July 2021. However, the Big Rubber Gun R2P still has a Facebook site, YouTube channel and twitter handle, calling to support the Ambazonian fighters. <https://www.facebook.com/The-Big-Rubber-Gun-R2P-100921271925452/> (accessed August 9, 2022).

Political measures of the Cameroonian government

In the last section of this overview of the Anglophone conflict, I wish to pay attention to some of the political measures initiated by the Biya regime as well as recent responses of the international community. Here I draw mainly on the comprehensive analyses of Mehler and his co-authors (2021) who have focused on the political tool of national dialogue, and of Annan, Crawford and Kewir (Annan et al. 2021, Crawford et al. 2022, Kewir et al. 2021) who researched the involvement of civil society organizations in conflict resolution.

As mentioned earlier, President Biya has been slow in recognizing Anglophone grievances, and up until today has completely dismissed the option of a two-state system. He insisted on holding presidential, communal, parliamentary, and regional elections in 2018 and 2020 respectively, regardless of the ongoing violence and electoral irregularities in the Anglophone regions and the election boycott by relevant opposition parties. Among the most pertinent political measures initiated by the Cameroonian government was the Major National Dialogue (*Grand Dialogue National*) realized in October 2019.

According to Mehler and his co-authors (2021), state-organized dialogues in Africa often serve a primarily symbolic purpose, and rarely result in significant political change. They highlight the performative and spectacular character of these high-profile events, and emphasize the importance of staging them as inclusive procedures that claim to integrate the voices of different sections of society. In the Cameroonian case, the government invited representatives of political parties, civil society, religious and traditional authorities, the Cameroonian diaspora, and selected separatist leaders to participate in the five-day event held in the *Palais de Congrès* in Yaoundé. A total of 400 participants agreed to form working groups and discuss the government-set agenda. Conversely, several opposition politicians and separatist leaders rejected the invitation on the grounds that the dialogue allowed only for a debate over decentralization, but not federalism or Anglophone independence. Moreover, given the exile and imprisonment of separatist leaders, diasporic intellectuals did not trust the government's reassurance of political freedom. Notwithstanding the absence of relevant players, the working groups formulated recommendations that were compiled in an extensive

report. A website documenting the Dialogue was set up, and the final resolutions were read out at the concluding event as part of its spectacular *mise en scene* (Mehler et al. 2021: 12).²¹

While representatives of civil society were invited to participate in the Major National Dialogue, the analysis of Kewir and his co-authors (2021) shows that civic space has been shrinking in the context of the Anglophone conflict, and that civil society organizations have been delimited in their efforts to contribute to conflict management. Besides coping with administrative restrictions, many civil society organizations have been confronted with security threats stemming from the ongoing violence in the conflict region, which has further restrained their scope of action. In an effort to contribute to conflict resolution, their activities often concentrate on providing humanitarian relief, documenting human rights abuses, or campaigning for peace (Kewir et al. 2021: 20-25). I suggest that the way civil society organizations are positioned also varies depending on their perception by the Cameroonian government. For example, identity-based minority groups, such as the Mbororo who are seen as relatively government-friendly, have been actively invited to participate in the Major National Dialogue. Conversely, other activist groups, such as the Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT), who have been vocal in drawing national and international attention to the ongoing atrocities, had to make a decided effort to gain access to the Dialogue (Kewir et al. 2021: 30).

The Major National Dialogue did not bring about the much hoped-for political change, nor did it contribute to reducing violence in the Anglophone regions. Several of the ensuing measures were actually the long-overdue implementation of legal provisions adopted during the democratization process of the 1990s. For example, the laws on decentralization and bilingualism signed in December 2019 have their roots in the 1996 Constitution (Mehler et al. 2021: 13). Moreover, while the new decentralization law confers special status to the North West and South West regions based on their linguistic and historical heritage, Anglophones have criticized the law as inadequate; it does not enable political self-determination, but

²¹ The Website of the Major National Dialogue bears the slogan "Major National Dialogue: Living together in PEACE". Besides a detailed press kit and other documents, it presents a number of photographs and quotes from the speeches of President Paul Biya and of the Prime Minister and Chairman of the Major National Dialogue John Ngute. Furthermore, it displays a long list of encouraging reactions by national and international actors, such as the Spokesperson of the UN Secretary General, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and the African Union Commission (Government of Cameroon n.d).

continues to concentrate decision-making power in the hands of the Francophone political elite.²² Importantly, despite pledging to invest in the development of the Anglophone regions and dedicating part of the national budget to a joint decentralization fund, President Biya further intensified military intervention in the wake of the Major National Dialogue.

The role of the international community

While I have highlighted local initiatives to contribute to conflict resolution by both government and non-governmental actors, it is important to also consider the role of the international community in this context. Since the early phase of the conflict, Anglophone Cameroonians have placed their hope in international institutions, such as the Commonwealth, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the African Union, to endorse their grievances and help resolve the conflict with its severe consequences for education, wellbeing, and the economy in the country's English-speaking regions. But the international community has been slow in engaging with the conflict, as reflected in Cameroon's repeated ranking as among the world's most neglected displacement crises (Norwegian Refugee Council 2022). National and international actors, including the Catholic church, several governments and the United Nations, have encouraged President Paul Biya to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and have pushed for a consensual approach (ICG 2019). This is also the background, against which the Major National Dialogue ought to be seen. While the Swiss were invited and others have offered to mediate peace talks between the government and the separatists, the Biya regime clearly prioritizes a homegrown solution while, at the same time, demonstrating its responsiveness to international pressure.

Yet the role of international actors, in particular European governments and their complicity in the conflict, deserves a critical review. Willis and her co-authors (2020) conducted a thorough investigation of the involvement and impact of nation-state actors and supra-national organizations in Cameroon. They show that several governments have been complicit in the Anglophone conflict by way of economic interest and development aid. The report clearly identifies, among other things, the interventions of France, the US, and Germany to strengthen and professionalize the Cameroonian army (specifically, the Rapid

²² Personal information by a Cameroonian political analyst, interviewed by Michaela Pelican, January 2020.

Intervention Brigade BIR) with the aim of bolstering anti-terrorist measures in the country's attempts to control Boko Haram. However, as it turns out, these investments are no longer exclusively used to fight the 'foreign enemy', but against fellow Cameroonians, both combatants and civilians, in the Anglophone conflict. Furthermore, British and Chinese interest and unconditional investment in oil and gas exploitation in the Anglophone South West have contributed to legitimizing the Cameroonian government's disproportionate military interventions against separatists and civilians in the region.

It is only in the third year of violent conflict, with the occurrence of drastic human rights abuses and their international publicity, that international response has successfully been elicited. These include, among others, the international headlines on the Ngarbuh and the Kumba school massacres of 2020; the audacious confrontation of French President Macron by the Leader of the activist group Brigade Anti-Sardinards (BAS) in Paris in February 2020, which prompted Macron to publicly acknowledge "intolerable human rights violations" in Cameroon (Reuters Staff 2020); and the repeated and vocal protests of diaspora Cameroonians in front of President Paul Biya's hotel in Geneva where he regularly resides.²³ So far, the most resolute measures have been taken by the US government which on account of serious human rights violations in the Anglophone conflict excluded Cameroon from the AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act) trade agreement in January 2020. This was followed by US Senate Resolution 684 on 17th February 2021, which calls on "a genuinely inclusive dialogue toward resolving the ongoing civil conflict in Anglophone Cameroon". Subsequently, in July 2021, the US Secretary of State announced targeted sanctions, such as visa restrictions on individuals believed to undermine the conflict's peaceful resolution (Blinken 2021). In April 2022, the US Department of Homeland Security announced the designation of Cameroon for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for 18 months, thus granting Cameroonians based in the United States the right to extend their stay on the grounds of ongoing armed conflict (Department of Homeland Security 2022). With these measures, the United States has adopted a path that many scholars and analysts deem necessary to promote peace and stability in Cameroon (e.g. ICG 2019).

²³ These protests escalated in June 2019 and July 2021 and may have contributed to alerting the Swiss government to its role in the Anglophone conflict (see also AFP/ts 2019; Crawford 2019; rjm/tgb 2021).

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide an overview of the historical and political background of the conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. As I write, the conflict is in its fifth year, and I do not dare to assess its future dynamics.

While in Europe and the United States, the years 2020 and 2021 have largely been overshadowed by the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, there have been limited reports on how the pandemic has impacted life in Cameroon's conflict regions (Djouldé and Taguem Fah 2021; Ngong Song 2020; Plan International 2021). As I learned from irregular conversations with acquaintances in the North West region, the threat of an additional health risk felt scary in the beginning. It then translated into additional lockdowns, school interruptions, and opportunities for law enforcement officers to harass the population on the grounds of not complying with COVID-19 measures. Soon, COVID-19 converged with previous experiences of insecurity, hardship, and violence as part of the Anglophone conflict. Important for my own understanding, living through the pandemic helped me to relate to the most basic but daunting challenges of the Anglophone conflict, such as restriction of movement, educational loss, and the disruption of economic and social life.

The papers in this thematic mini-series (Adama 2022, Pelican et al. 2022, Willis et al. 2023) will provide different but complementary perspectives on the Anglophone conflict. Each, in its way, will contribute to an informed understanding of the complex experiences and dynamics of violent conflict. Taken together, they may shine a light on possible visions of a much hoped for post-conflict scenario.

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