



Cameroon: Divisions Widen Ahead of Presidential Vote

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What's new? Cameroon's presidential election on 7 October comes at a tense moment. The country is torn between the fight against Boko Haram in the Far North and the Anglophone conflict in the Northwest and Southwest.

Why does it matter? The risk of violence before and after the vote is highest in Anglophone regions, but exists in other areas. The opposition and several social movements dispute the legitimacy of the election, and Anglophone separatists intend to disrupt the vote. Tensions are rising as the government's stance hardens.

What should be done? The government and Anglophone armed groups should declare a ceasefire, at least for the election week. Cameroon's partners can encourage this by threatening sanctions against those on either side who commit violence. The government should also take steps to curb divisive rhetoric and dedicate more resources to election logistics.

I. Overview

On 7 October 2018, Cameroon heads for a hazardous presidential vote. The political climate is tense, the economy shaky and much of the country insecure, torn between Boko Haram in the Far North and a conflict in the Anglophone regions in the Northwest and Southwest. Intercommunal tensions are worsening not only in Anglophone regions but elsewhere. The government and armed Anglophone separatists still have time to declare a ceasefire, even if only a temporary one, to improve prospects for polling in areas affected by the conflict; outside powers should push them to do so. The government should dedicate more resources to logistical preparations for the election, take steps to curb rhetoric stigmatising specific ethnic groups and itself adopt a more conciliatory tone. After the vote, both it and separatists should support efforts by religious leaders to hold an Anglophone General Conference. Such a conference could help lay the ground for a national dialogue, which is necessary to resolve the Anglophone crisis.

The danger of violence around the vote in Anglophone regions is high. But other parts of the country could also be affected, even if the postponement of the parliamentary and municipal elections to October 2019, which carried their own danger of localised friction, has mitigated some risks. As election day approaches, tensions are growing and the government has become harder-line, opting for repression and ped-

dling conspiracy theories in response to demands for social and political reform. Embryonic movements are emerging across the country, which reject the election. Some of them call for a popular insurrection to unseat Cameroonian President Paul Biya. In the Anglophone regions and parts of the Far North, insecurity may hinder the smooth conduct of the vote.

No consensus exists among Cameroonian politicians on the electoral law, which clearly benefits President Biya's ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). The opposition regards the body responsible for organising the election (ELECAM) as biased and denounces the president's control over the judiciary, particularly the Constitutional Council, which resolves electoral disputes. In the absence of agreement on the rules of the game, opposition activists could contest results, possibly with violence. Fraud, including vote-buying, ballot boxes stuffing and the falsification of results, all of which are common in Cameroon, make such protests all the likelier.

In a more peaceful climate, the election could have offered Cameroon the political renewal it needs. As things stand, it risks further polarising society. Though time is short before the vote, the government could take steps to calm tensions and prevent violence. It should:

- ❑ Strike a more conciliatory tone as regards the Anglophone conflict and national-level tensions, recognise Anglophone grievances and condemn efforts to provoke communal hostility, especially rhetoric stigmatising ethnic groups, during the campaign. Opposition politicians and other actors who are voicing opinions, including on social media, should also moderate their language.
- ❑ Seek a ceasefire with armed Anglophone separatists for at least the week of the election. To do so, the government should release Anglophone detainees not implicated in violence as a show of good faith. This would reinforce separatists' credibility among Anglophones and should incentivise their leaders to agree to such a truce.
- ❑ Ensure that voting equipment is operational, and engage in a dialogue with the opposition, civil society and non-governmental organisations to find an equitable solution to enable displaced people, who number some 238,000 in the Far North and more than 300,000 in Anglophone regions, to vote. This could involve providing adequate resources to ELECAM to transport displaced voters to districts where they are registered or, failing that, to allow them to vote where they currently reside.

After the election, the new government should move to quell violence and, in particular, end the Anglophone crisis. If President Biya wins, as appears likely, doing so would bolster his legacy. In the event of an upset, his successor should quickly seek to end the instability of the past few years. It will be critical for the government to support the initiative by religious leaders to hold an Anglophone conference, which would allow Anglophones to select representatives for a national dialogue. Such a dialogue ought to reflect on defining the structure of the state (federalism or decentralisation), providing better economic, political and cultural representation for Anglophones in governing Cameroon, granting greater autonomy in certain sectors such as education and law to those regions, and rectifying injustices as well as histor-

ical discrimination. The new government should also initiate reforms of the country's centralised and hyper-presidential governing system, which has contributed to conflicts in its peripheries and to countrywide discontent.

Cameroon's partners, in particular France, the U.S., the UN and the African Union, should use the days before the election to push for a ceasefire between the government and armed groups in Anglophone areas while taking a firmer line and threatening sanctions against leaders implicated in violence on either side. A ceasefire would not only allow the vote to take place in conflict affected areas but foster a favourable climate for dialogue afterwards, both on the Anglophone issue and on wider governance reforms.

Electoral observers from the African Union and from the International Organisation of the Francophonie should make sure they cover events in the whole country, as far as security permits. They should consider all aspects of the election in their statements, including the need for a level playing field and the problems of the electoral register, and not limit their observations to polling day. Statements that acknowledge and offer solutions to wider problems could help calm tensions after the vote. International actors should also call on the government to refrain from cracking down violently against any protests that take place. Overall, they need to take more concerted action than they have thus far to help end prolonged instability in Cameroon that is detrimental to their interests in the sub-region.

II. Tension Rises as the Election Approaches

A. A Toxic Social and Political Climate

Cameroon's structural weaknesses (hyper-centralisation, no separation of powers, restriction of civil liberties, corruption of state officials, weak institutions and failure to renew its leadership), identified in previous Crisis Group reports, are becoming more problematic each passing year.¹ President Paul Biya, in power for 36 years, governs through a combination of clientelism, manipulation of ethnic rivalries and routine human rights violations. His party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), still dominates the political scene in this country of 25 million inhabitants.² The opposition and civil society remain largely weak and divided.

New social actors and political movements have nevertheless emerged during these last five years and events of the last three years show that Cameroonians can still be shocked and are prepared to take action. The death of a pregnant woman in March 2016 at the entrance to a public hospital in Douala (the country's economic capital, located in the Francophone littoral region), the Eseka train crash in October of the same year and the dissemination on the internet in July 2018 of a video that appeared to show Cameroonian soldiers executing unarmed women and children in

¹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°160, *Cameroon: Fragile State?*, 25 May 2010; and Africa Briefing N°101, *Cameroon: Prevention is Better than Cure*, 4 September 2014.

² The CPDM has 148 deputies out of 180, 78 senators out of 100 and administers 305 of the country's 360 communes (administrative division). Paul Biya received 78 per cent of votes in the presidential election of 2011.

the Far North have provoked indignation and protests in the country.³ The blocking of the parliamentary session of November 2017 by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) to demand a debate on the Anglophone question also showed that the traditional opposition, although weak, can still stand up to the government.⁴

While political tension grows as the presidential election approaches, there is no framework for dialogue between Yaoundé, the opposition and civil society. The government seems to be adopting the same strategy it employed after the 2011 presidential election: break the main social movements, isolate the most vociferous leaders and “UPECiste” activists⁵ and recruit leaders from the usual sources of opposition, such as students, street vendors, commercial motorcycle drivers and others from the transport sector.⁶ Recently it expanded its surveillance networks across social media, in particular Facebook.⁷

This strategy could prove counterproductive: by decapitating these movements, the government loses understanding of working class dynamics and hence its insight into how the population mobilise. The absence of leaders means that when violence erupts, as with the serious riots in February 2008, there is hardly anybody in civil society or in the opposition to moderate the rioters and dialogue with the government.⁸

³ Monique Koumaté was reportedly refused treatment at the hospital despite being about to give birth because she had no money. According to hospital staff, she was already dead on arrival. Her story shocked public opinion and led to protests. “Cameroun: la mort atroce d’une femme enceinte provoque un scandale à Douala”, France 24, 14 March 2016. “Cameroun : deuil national après l’accident de train d’Eseka”, TV5 Monde, 23 October 2016; “Au Cameroun, une vidéo montre des femmes et des enfants exécutés par des hommes en tenue militaire”, *Le Monde*, 19 July 2018. The government initially described the video in question as “fake news”, before opening an investigation and announcing the arrest of seven soldiers. “Cameroun : sept militaires arrêtés après la diffusion d’une vidéo sur les exactions de l’armée”, *Jeune Afrique*, 11 August 2018. “Cameroon atrocity: finding the soldiers who killed that woman”, BBC, 24 September 2018. This video provoked contrasting reactions in Cameroon. Some internet users were outraged, but others immediately denounced it as an attempt to destabilise the country, as they usually do in response to reports published by human rights organisations. Abuses by the Cameroonian security forces form part of a long history and state practice in which atrocities against citizens are a regular occurrence. Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon: Fragile State?*, op. cit.

⁴ “Cameroun: des députés demandent un débat sur la question anglophone à l’assemblée nationale”, Radio France Internationale (RFI), 25 November 2017.

⁵ The French term UPECiste refers to activists and groups who lay claim to the legacy of the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC). Formed in 1948, the UPC is Cameroon’s oldest political party. It took up arms against the colonial power in the late 1950s. The war left tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands dead before finishing in 1971. The party is now divided but remains a historic symbol of opposition to the authorities in Yaoundé. Manuel Domergue, Thomas Deltombe and Jacob Tatsitsa, *Kamerun : une guerre cachée aux origines de la Françafrique* (Paris, 2011).

⁶ In July 2018, a chief superintendent of one of the Cameroonian intelligence agencies congratulated himself on having infiltrated groups and recruiting a dozen activists in 2017 alone. Crisis Group interviews, chief superintendent and presidents of associations, Douala, July 2018.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, intelligence officers and political activists, Yaoundé, July 2018. « Facebook discute des fake news avec les autorités au Cameroun », VOA, 9 August 2018.

⁸ In February 2008, tens of thousands of people demonstrated against the high cost of living, the increase in fuel prices and a constitutional amendment that removed the limit on the number of consecutive presidential terms of office. Forty demonstrators were killed according to the government and more than 100 according to local and international NGOs. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°161, *Cameroon: The Dangers of a Fracturing Regime*, 24 June 2010.

Ordinary people's opinions are increasingly radical. In Douala and Yaoundé, dozens of young people interviewed by Crisis Group think they should "make themselves heard by doing what the Anglophones are doing". Some go so far as to say: "since the government and opposition are both against us, we might as well spoil everything so that nobody wins".⁹

Since 2017, intercommunal tensions have worsened throughout the country. On social networks and in the media, journalists, politicians, academics, activists and other civil society actors speak in terms that stigmatise ethnic groups. While ethnic divides are nothing new in Cameroon, the approaching presidential election is aggravating them as leaders of the governing party and the opposition use them to create or consolidate their political base. There is a danger that ethnic antagonisms will mirror political tensions and exacerbate any violence that may occur in the electoral period.

In recent years, the government has used the tense security situation to further reduce civil liberties. For example, it has used the antiterrorist law passed in 2014 against journalists and civil society. Since 2017, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications and the Ministry of Communications have explicitly threatened journalists and sought to regulate the media more frequently.¹⁰

The government is also restricting public expression by banning demonstrations organised by the opposition and civil society.¹¹ Some in civil society have responded by not seeking authorisation to hold their marches. With the exception of the Stand up for Cameroon movement, they have, however, been careful not to express political grievances.¹² They limit their demands, regularly emphasising that their actions are not political and that they are not calling for the departure of Biya, no doubt to avoid harsher repression.¹³

The crackdown on civil liberties is accompanied by a hardening attitude toward international partners and international organisations. Yaoundé responds angrily to the smallest criticisms and maintains a stern attitude toward diplomats in the capital and international organisations. A part of the population, whom the government has

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, youths and traders, Douala and Yaoundé, March-July 2018.

¹⁰ "Journalists not terrorists: In Cameroon, anti-terror legislation is used to silence critics and suppress dissent", Committee for the Protection of Journalists, 20 September 2017.

¹¹ "Cameroun: la police déployée à Douala pour empêcher une manifestation", *Jeune Afrique*, 21 October 2017.

¹² Stand up for Cameroon brings together four political parties (Cameroon People's Party, Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon, the Universe and the UPC Loyalists (UPC des Fidèles)) and various associations. Since 2015, this movement has organised a dozen demonstrations on a range of political issues, including reform of the electoral code, and has tried to mobilise the population on social questions by organising "black Fridays" in Douala and Yaoundé. These peaceful demonstrations, repressed by the security forces, are not well-attended. Crisis Group interview, Stand up for Cameroon coordinator, Douala, March 2018. "Arrestation d'une vingtaine de femmes après une marche de l'opposition à Yaoundé", VOA, 9 March 2018.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, presidents of political parties and trade unions, Yaoundé and Douala, March-July 2018.

recently convinced that there is an international conspiracy to destabilise the country, approve of this attitude.¹⁴

Finally, the deterioration of the economic situation in the last four years gives cause for concern. According to the World Bank, growth was 3.2 per cent in 2017, compared to 5.7 in 2015, while the National Institute of Statistics estimates that growth of at least 7 per cent is needed to reduce extreme poverty.¹⁵ Moreover, despite support from the International Monetary Fund since 2017 (in the form of a \$666 million Extended Credit Facility over three years), the government has made no progress in improving governance or in fighting corruption. The increase in poverty further exacerbates social discontent.¹⁶ The combination of all these factors could lead to generalised violence, as in February 2008.

B. *The New Opposition Parties: Strengths and Weaknesses*

ELECAM approved nine candidates for the presidential election to be held on 7 October, eight of them representing opposition parties. The traditional opposition parties are evolving slowly: only the SDF is presenting a new candidate, Joshua Osih, its vice-president. But new parties have emerged since 2013, including the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (*Mouvement pour la renaissance du Cameroun*, MRC) of Maurice Kamto and the NOW movement of Akere Muna, both of which have started to gain traction.

However, these two candidates do not yet have a strong national profile and compete for similar constituents. They can count on support from well-educated young people, those aged 35-55 and the middle class. Muna has a weak regional and community base. A native of the Anglophone Northwest, this former president of the Cameroon Bar, influential internationally, is far from enjoying unanimous support of Anglophones.¹⁷ In any case, opposition parties have not been able to take advantage of the discontent among Anglophones and turnout will probably be very low in these regions because of the armed conflict and the separatists' call for a boycott.

An academic, lawyer and former minister, Kamto hopes for the support of voters in the West where he is from, the Far North and the cities of the south – Douala and Yaoundé. But the West is already dominated by the CPDM and even the Social Dem-

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior officials and Western diplomats, Yaoundé, March- July 2018. Marie Emmanuelle Pommerolle, "Les violences dans l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun: le complot comme outil d'interprétation et de luttes politiques", *Politique africaine*, N°138 (2015), pp. 163-177.

¹⁵ See the World Bank website, <https://donnees.banquemondiale.org/pays/cameroun>. The reduction in growth is the product of poor governance but also of the fight against Boko Haram and the reduction in the price of hydrocarbons, which account for 10 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).

¹⁶ According to the National Institute of Statistics, the poverty rate rose from 29 to 37.5 per cent between 2010 and 2016. « Annuaire statistique du Cameroun 2016 », National Institute of Statistics, Yaoundé, 2016. It has probably continued to increase and some statisticians think it is higher than the official figures. They believe that these figures in fact indicate the level of extreme poverty, as they correspond to the percentage of the population with an income of less than \$1.5 a day rather than \$4 – an indicator recognised by the World Bank. Crisis Group interviews, economists and statisticians, Yaoundé, March 2018.

¹⁷ Akere Muna is the son of the former prime minister of Western Cameroon and president of the Federal Republic of Cameroon's National Assembly. Many Anglophones accuse him of "betraying" Anglophone Cameroon at the time of the abolition of federalism in 1972.

ocratic Front (SDF), as are Yaoundé and Douala where competition is even fiercer.¹⁸ As for the Far North, the government enjoys strong support and traditional chiefs and administrative authorities are all clients of the ruling party.

Although from the SDF, a long established party, Osih also personifies the renewal of the opposition. Originally from the Anglophone Southwest but a fluent French speaker, he has solid support in the Anglophone regions and also in the Francophone city of Douala. Moreover, his party has a national infrastructure. But other members of the opposition and some members of his own party have criticised him for his business relations with President Biya and for his alleged Swiss citizenship.¹⁹

Among the new wave of opposition forces, Cabral Libii, academic and political analyst, 38, is gaining ground. Inspired by the career of the French president, Emmanuel Macron, since 2017 he has been at the head of the “11 million citizens” movement, a reference to the number of people of voting age in Cameroon (the electorate is in fact 12 million). He does not have a strong regional base, but enjoys great support among young people, the middle class and is among the least ethnically divisive opposition leaders. It is difficult to assess his actual political clout, but his movement has more than 250,000 supporters on social media and he has reportedly convinced more than 10,000 young people to register to vote since 2017.²⁰

Since campaigning officially began on 22 September, these four notable candidates and others like Serge Espoir Matomba, leader of the United People for Social Renovation (*Peuple uni pour la rénovation sociale*, PURS) are drawing a strong following to their meetings. The emergence of new opposition candidates has galvanised some Francophones around the electoral campaigns, which may hint at a stronger turnout in Francophone areas than in previous elections, despite ongoing problems with voter registration.

In addition, former ministers detained for misappropriating public funds could play a role in this election. Some of them, such as Marafa Hamidou Yaya, former minister of local government, still have support in their regional strongholds and make no secret of their desire to resume a political career. They have resources to fund an electoral campaign and are in a position to mobilise their supporters to vote for any of the opposition candidates. Former ministers and senior officials who are currently serving prison sentences are hoping for an amnesty and even a return to political life if their candidate is elected. Others are content with inflicting some damage on the government.²¹ Recent months have seen a stream of visits by opposition candidates to Yaoundé prison.

Overall, the opposition has little chance of winning. It has been unable to choose a common candidate to represent it at this election, in which there will be a single round. In the absence of a single candidate, parties like the Cameroon People's Party have proposed joint initiatives and ad hoc alliances around the parliamentary and

¹⁸ The president of the Senate and the CPDM secretary general are both from the West. The traditional chiefs and most important businessmen in the region are members of the CPDM.

¹⁹ One of his parents is Swiss and one of his companies rents aircraft to the president and his family. Crisis Group interviews, activists of the SDF and other opposition parties, Yaoundé, Douala and Buea, March-July 2018.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, ELECAM officials and journalists, Yaoundé, March 2018.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, party leaders, imprisoned former ministers and senior public officials, Yaoundé and Douala, March-July 2018.

municipal elections, initially scheduled for this year but postponed until October 2019, but this idea has failed to generate much enthusiasm. Muna pleaded in vain for a non-aggression pact between the opposition parties to focus their criticism on the government and stop attacking each other. Meanwhile, Libii unsuccessfully suggested holding opposition primaries to choose a single candidate.

The egos of party leaders, ethnic and regional divides and, in some cases, ideological differences (the SDF describes itself as socialist, while many other opposition figures describe themselves as liberals) are not enough to explain this lack of unity. The electoral code is designed to keep opposition parties competing with each other rather than with the ruling party.²² The government encourages and maintains this competition, using legislation, co-option and repression to stymie the work of the opposition and to create fake opposition parties.²³ In July 2018, twenty of these so-called opposition parties declared their support for Biya's candidacy.²⁴

In reality, despite growing discontent, the advantage conferred on the incumbent by the electoral code, the state machinery and the support of his ethnic group (Beti) should be enough to ensure a majority, although likely below 50 per cent.²⁵ However, the government is determined to maintain full control and show international public opinion that it has extensive popular support. According to many observers, including members of the governing party, Biya will not only win a resounding victory but his inner circle will also decide each party's share of the vote and the order in which opposition parties are placed, based on ethno-political calculations and the docility of party leaders or their ties to the government.²⁶

III. Election at Risk

A. Weaknesses of the Electoral Process and the Threat of Violent Opposition

A series of factors threaten the October 2018 election. The absence of reliable electoral and judicial systems is the main obstacle to a successful poll. In March 2018, the government created a Constitutional Council, among other things to rule on election disputes, but then appointed members close to the CPDM. Most members of the

²² The first-past-the-post system, the use of ballot papers for each candidate (which allows governing party officials to buy votes from other candidates and to check how citizens have voted based on unused ballot papers), the boundaries of electoral constituencies and the funding of political parties puts opposition parties at a disadvantage and encourages them to compete against each other. See "Prévenir et lutter contre la fraude électorale au Cameroun", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012; Law No. 2012/001 of 19 April 2012 relating to the Electoral Code in Cameroon, amended and complemented by Law No. 2012/017 of 21 December 2012. Crisis Group interviews, president of the Cameroon People's Party, SDF deputies and academics, Yaoundé and Douala, March 2018.

²³ In recent weeks, some local representatives of opposition parties who are also civil servants have received threats from the government or disciplinary action. Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil servants, September 2018.

²⁴ "Présidentielle au Cameroun: massif soutien du G20 à la candidature de Paul Biya", RFI, 21 July 2018.

²⁵ "Présidentielle camerounaise: le bal des ambitieux aura bien lieu", *Le Monde*, 18 July 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, academics, diplomats, CPDM officials and members of civil society, Douala and Yaoundé, 2018.

Electoral Council (ELECAM) and the Supreme Court are also loyal to the ruling party.²⁷ That these institutions are not representative frustrates opposition activists and has, in the past, caused post-electoral violence and boycotts.

The organisation of the vote itself is a challenge. ELECAM's equipment is partly outdated and there have been problems with its database during voter registration.²⁸ This has likely contributed to the low number of voters registered on the electoral roll – a recurring problem in Cameroon. In July 2018, only 6.6 million people were registered out of an electorate of 12 million, according to the National Institute of Statistics.²⁹ Moreover, the election could cost double the projected election budget of CFA 50 billion (€76 million), according to senior government and ELECAM officials.³⁰

There is further potential for violence. New social movements have denounced the electoral process and plan to express their dissatisfaction in the streets of Yaoundé and Douala. They hope to encourage a popular unarmed insurrection, along the lines of the Tunisian revolution, to “drive out the tyrant” Biya in October 2018.³¹ These Francophone movements have links with Anglophone separatists. Local associations, intellectuals, activists in the diaspora and some political parties boycotting the election are prime movers in the plan to drive out Biya. For the moment, these movements remain embryonic and are mainly present on social media.³²

Other groups of Francophone activists plan for armed violence in Douala and Yaoundé during the electoral period and beyond. They already have dozens of combatants at their command in the two cities as well as in the West region. These groups are slowly taking shape and are working with Anglophone separatists.³³ One group composed of Anglophones and Francophones has fighting units in the West and in Douala and plans to disrupt the election there. If they follow through with their threats, this would seriously destabilise the country, especially as Anglophone armed groups have also been building cells in the West, the Littoral and the Centre regions.³⁴ In general, while the risk of electoral violence is difficult to assess, the current situation resembles that of 2008 in many ways, but now with an election taking place against a backdrop of an emerging civil war in the Anglophone regions.

B. Two Danger Zones: The Anglophone Regions and the Far North

Arrangements for voting in the Northwest and Southwest regions and in the border areas of the Far North are still uncertain. In the Anglophone regions, the conflict between armed separatists and the security forces has been going on for a year. The

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, academics, journalist and ELECAM officials, Yaoundé, July 2018.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, academics and ELECAM officials, Nairobi and Yaoundé, March-July 2018.

²⁹ “Annuaire statistique du Cameroun. Chapitre 4: les caractéristiques de la population”, National Institute of Statistics, 2015, p. 56; and “Statistiques des inscrits et des bureaux de vote par région au 11 septembre 2018”, ELECAM, September 2018.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior public officials at the presidency and the Ministry of Local Government, ELECAM senior officials, Yaoundé, March-June 2018.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Douala, July 2018.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Francophones activists, Yaoundé, March 2018. Crisis Group email correspondence, leaders of this movement, June 2018.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, Francophone and Anglophone activists, Douala and Yaoundé, July 2018.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and activists, Douala and Yaoundé, July 2018.

violence has already caused the death of at least 420 civilians, 175 army and police officers and hundreds of separatist fighters. A further 300 members of the security forces have been wounded.³⁵ By mid-August, there were more than 300,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in the two regions, including 246,000 in the Southwest alone, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). A further 25,000 people have sought refuge in Nigeria, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).³⁶

Violence increased in the week of the 1st of October (the anniversary of the reunification of Cameroonian territories under the French and British mandate) with around twenty people killed.³⁷ The situation could deteriorate the day of the election on 7 October, even affecting Francophone areas. This spike in violence has driven new displacement, including toward the Francophone regions (West, Littoral and Centre).³⁸

The separatists want to disrupt voting in the Northwest and Southwest, which, if successful, would deepen the sense of exclusion in those areas. Three armed groups and a dozen self-defence militias, totalling more than one thousand combatants, are currently active in the Anglophone zone.³⁹ They are equipped with RPGs and machine guns and control large rural areas. As the election approaches, they are intensifying fundraising to acquire heavy weapons.⁴⁰ They are trying to create their own economic networks and to levy taxes on commercial activities, while at the same time attacking the state's economic infrastructure, including by setting fire to the property of state-owned companies, such as the Cameroon Development Corporation, or by seizing their goods.⁴¹ The Cameroon Employers' Association (GICAM) estimates that the Anglophone crisis has already caused losses of CFA269 billion (€410 million); 6,434 formal jobs have been lost in agribusiness where production has been disrupted and a further 8,000 formal jobs are under threat.⁴²

Ensuring displaced people can vote is still an issue in the Far North, where insecurity caused by Boko Haram persists in places along the border with Nigeria. According to the UN, the region has 238,000 IDPs, as well as possibly 260,000 stateless

³⁵ Crisis Group compilation using reliable open sources and 100 interviews with the security forces, diplomats, members of armed separatist groups and Anglophone civil society actors in 2018.

³⁶ "Cameroon displacement estimates in Southwest region (as of 16 August 2018)", OCHA and IOM, 16 August 2018; "Emergency update: Cameroon refugee situation, Nigeria", UNHCR, 15 August 2018.

³⁷ "Cameroun : huit tués dans le Sud-Ouest anglophone, en pleine campagne électorale", Africa-news, 27 September 2018. Crisis Group telephone interviews, security forces, local politicians and Anglophone activists, 1 October 2018.

³⁸ "Cameroun: exode des populations dans les régions anglophones" RFI, 16 September 2018.

³⁹ Crisis Group estimate based on dozens of interviews with Cameroon security forces, members of armed separatist groups, Western diplomats, Cameroonian researchers and journalists and after viewing about 30 authenticated videos showing armed group camps, checkpoints and assemblies in Anglophone regions.

⁴⁰ See Crisis Group Reports at www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon.

⁴¹ "La crise dans le Sud-Ouest impacte la filière huile de palme au sein de la CDC et Pamol", *investiraucameroun.com*, 12 July 2018.

⁴² "Insécurité dans les régions du Sud-Ouest et du Nord-Ouest : conséquences économiques et impact sur l'activité des entreprises", Cameroon Employers' Association, July 2018.

people.⁴³ The remoteness of these areas, the continued attacks by Boko Haram along the Nigerian border and the failure to resolve the situation of stateless people (who will not vote in this election but who should have the right to vote in subsequent polls in 2019) and ensure that IDPs can vote could prevent hundreds of thousands of people from participating.⁴⁴

C. *International Actors at an Impasse*

Western actors seem unable to prevent violence. Some tend to downplay the risk of violence, whether linked to the election or the Anglophone crisis, and the repercussions of such instability on the sub-region. To prevent them having their say on the electoral process, the government has turned down offers by the European Union (EU) and the U.S. to fund the election and has only invited international observers with whom it has better relations – the International Organisation of the Francophonie and the African Union. Many diplomats and Cameroonians see these organisations as too soft on the government.⁴⁵

Moreover, international actors are divided. France continues to support Biya, including within the EU. But a number of senior U.S. officials are frustrated by poor governance and have made this known.⁴⁶ Some European countries share this frustration but refuse to take a public position outside the EU framework for fear of reprisals, including commercial measures, by the government.⁴⁷

France's position is singular. About 300 French companies are present in the country, some of which are close to staff in the Cameroonian president's office, recently consolidated their commercial position despite Chinese competition.⁴⁸ Many Cameroonian observers stress that Paris seems to be prioritising its short-term economic interests to the detriment the democratic process in the country.⁴⁹ However, a prolonged conflict in the Anglophone zone or violent demonstrations in the run-up to the election could harm its interests. In the long term, Paris's support for Biya's government strengthens anti-French feeling in a country where memories of the war of independence remain strong.⁵⁰ French diplomats generally refute these allegations, underlining that France is neutral and privately presses Biya to move toward an inclusive dialogue with the Anglophones and implement legislation on decentralisation.⁵¹

⁴³ "Statistiques des réfugiés et IDPs de l'Extrême-Nord", UNHCR Maroua, 7 September 2018. Crisis Group interviews, UNHCR senior officials, Yaoundé, July 2018. Stateless people in the Far North are people probably of Cameroonian origin, but who do not have official documents to prove it and cannot obtain them as the authorities suspect that they are not Cameroonian.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, UNHCR senior officials and mayors, Far North and Yaoundé, March-July 2018.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Western and Cameroonian diplomats, Yaoundé, March-July 2018.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, diplomat and senior U.S. officials, Washington and Yaoundé, June and July 2018.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Yaoundé, 2018.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and Cameroon government officials, Yaoundé, July 2018.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Cameroonian academics and journalists, Western diplomats, Yaoundé, March-July 2018.

⁵⁰ "Les violences dans le Cameroun anglophone: une nouvelle guerre cachée", *Libération*, 22 May 2018.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, French diplomats, Yaoundé and Paris, March and September 2018.

IV. The Difficult Road to Stability

This election should have been preceded by an inclusive national dialogue between the government and the Anglophone opposition (proponents of decentralisation, federalists and separatists) about what form the state should take and how to improve governance and find a solution to the conflict. That has not happened as the government has prioritised fighting separatists on the ground, but the Anglophone General Conference scheduled for 21-22 November, an initiative of several religious leaders aimed at laying the ground for a national dialogue, is a step in the right direction. It deserves support from both the government and international actors.⁵²

Now days away from the election, the government should strike a more conciliatory tone and negotiate a ceasefire with the armed groups. It is probably too late to build a consensus between the government, opposition and civil society on the electoral law, but there is still time to address some election logistics problems. After the election, the priorities on the political agenda should be to calm the social and political climate and intercommunal tensions.

A. Emergency Measures before the Election

1. A ceasefire in the Anglophone regions

In the Anglophone zone, a minimum agreement between the government and the separatists on a ceasefire during election week would be difficult but not impossible to achieve. As a sign of good faith, the government should release Anglophone detainees who have not encouraged or committed acts of violence. Releasing detainees would strengthen the separatists' credibility among Anglophones and could encourage them to agree to a ceasefire. This would create an atmosphere favourable to a comprehensive dialogue after the election.

The government and the separatists seem reluctant to make the concessions necessary to restore peace in the Anglophone regions. But strong international pressure could soften their positions. Cameroon's partners, especially the U.S. and the EU, should put pressure on Yaoundé and the armed groups in the Anglophone zone to accept a ceasefire. They should take a firmer line and warn Cameroon that they might review military cooperation, while threatening to impose sanctions against senior army officers, members of government or separatist leaders responsible for the violence.

2. A more conciliatory approach

The Cameroonian government should immediately shift to a more moderate approach both toward the conflict in the Anglophone regions and at the national level. It should in particular recognise the grievances of the Anglophone population. It should also ensure that language stigmatising some ethnic groups does not develop further, in particular during the election campaign. In support of the government, the National Communication Council, a consultative body answering to the prime minister, should monitor Cameroon's media landscape and bring any incitement to violence to the

⁵² "Cameroon: Proposed Anglophone General Conference Deserves National and International Support", Crisis Group statement, 17 September 2018.

attention of the authorities, taking care to exercise balance and respect the right to free expression.

The government should ensure that the security forces do not use excessive violence in suppressing protests. International partners should pressure the government to that effect.

3. Technical and logistical adjustments

There is still time to provide ELECAM with the resources it needs to replace defective materials and equip the 24,990 polling stations, for example, with indelible ink.

The government, opposition parties, local NGOs and the UN should discuss voting arrangements for IDPs. For the Far North, one solution considered in Yaoundé proposed that each party organise transport for its displaced supporters to the polling stations where they are registered, but in the absence of clear communication the government's and ELECAM's exact current plans remain unknown.⁵³ If this plan is maintained, it would benefit the governing party because it is the only one that has the resources to move its supporters, especially as it can rely on assistance from the authorities. A fairer solution for the opposition would be to provide ELECAM with the means to transport displaced voters or, failing that, allowing them to vote where they currently reside. For the first solution international support should ideally be provided, while the second solution would require a decree to change the electoral code, which does not currently allow this.

Organising the vote for 300,000 Anglophone IDPs is also problematic. In contrast to the Far North, ELECAM and the government seem to have opted for the creation of large voting centres in each department where IDPs could vote securely. Some candidates reject this solution on the grounds that it forces voters to travel dozens of kilometres on a day when the use of motorbikes and vehicles will probably be prohibited in the Anglophone areas.⁵⁴ This solution would also require a presidential decree, because according to the electoral code, voters must use the polling station where they are registered.

International observers should deploy across the whole country. In order to contribute to a calmer post-electoral situation, their statements should take account of general problems linked to elections, including the use of state resources by the ruling party and the very low levels of registered voters.

B. After the Election, Make Peace with the Anglophone Regions and Reduce Intercommunal Hostility

The post-electoral period should be a time for refashioning Cameroon's institutions and governance, making peace with the Anglophone regions and reducing intercommunal hostility at the national level.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, ELECAM regional and departmental officials, Far North, March 2018.

⁵⁴ "Cameroun – présidentielle 2018: Joshua Osih contre la création des centres de vote dans les régions anglophones", *actu cameroun.com*, 23 September 2018; "Les balles font fuir les électeurs' des régions anglophones du Cameroun", *Le Monde*, 24 September 2018; "Présidentielle au Cameroun : le dispositif sécuritaire, grande inconnue du scrutin en zone anglophone", *Jeune Afrique*, 8 August 2018.

The president-elect should initiate an inclusive national dialogue to define the structure of the state (federalism, regionalism or properly enacted decentralisation) involving all sectors of Anglophone society. This dialogue should be preceded by conciliatory statements and measures to ease tension, such as the above-mentioned ceasefire, and the release of separatist leaders and detainees who have not encouraged or committed acts of violence. Supporting the organisation of the Anglophone General Conference in November would provide a sign of good faith and represent a first step toward dialogue.

This dialogue would also enable a discussion about providing better economic, political and cultural representation for Anglophones in governing Cameroon, as well as rectifying injustices and historical discrimination. That would require a new Anglophone elite in the government and senior levels of the civil service to reflect the changes that have taken place in Anglophone society over the last two years. The government should plan to reintegrate the Anglophone diaspora into local political structures, including separatists who have agreed to dialogue. Finally, after agreement has been reached on the form the state should take, it will be necessary to demobilise, disarm and reintegrate around a thousand armed separatist combatants.

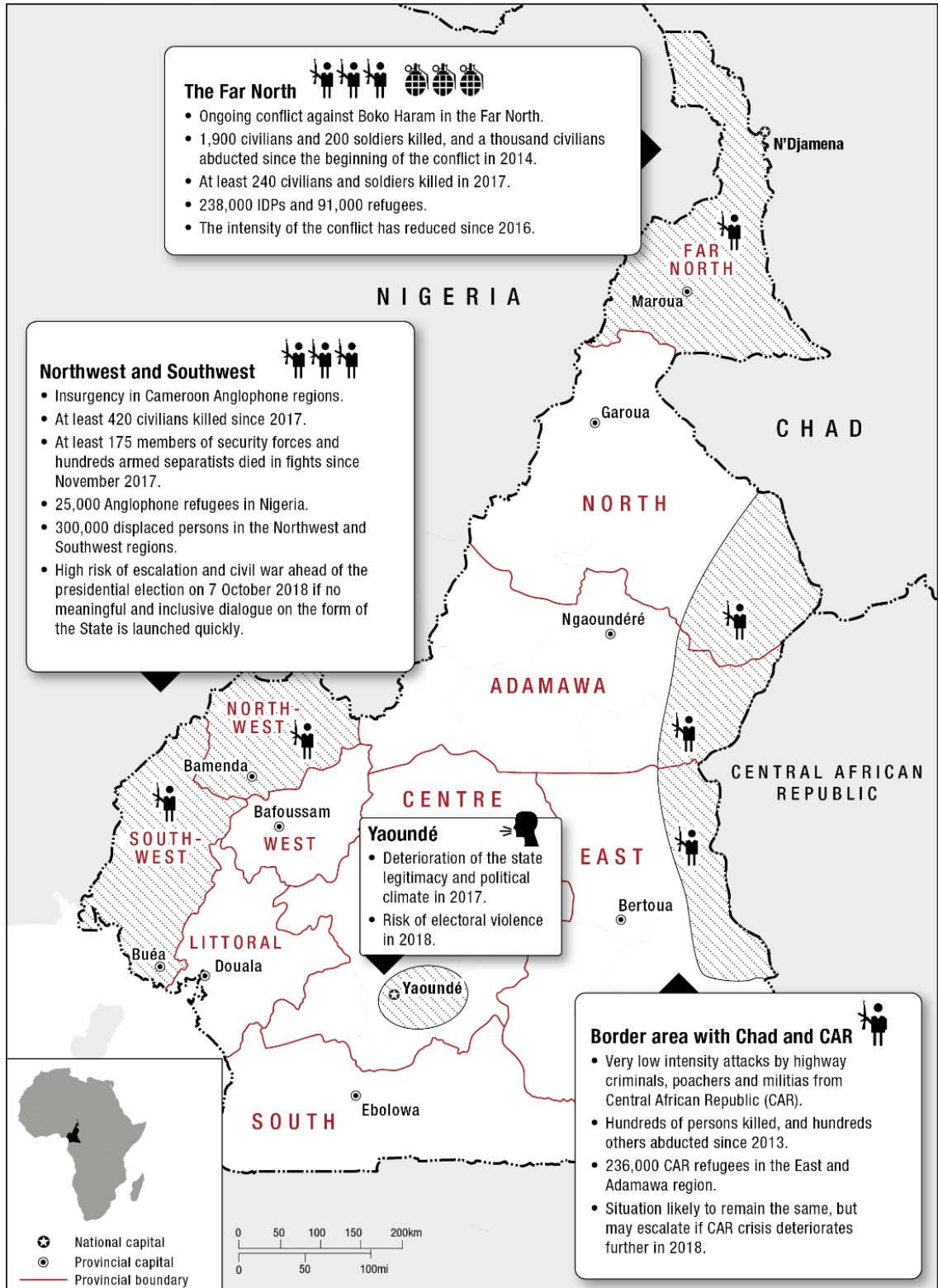
Governance in Cameroon depends on the redistribution of resources through ethnic and political networks, which partially overlap. This sits alongside a multiparty system heavy weighted in favour of the ruling party. The combination of these two elements provides fertile ground for community tensions to develop, especially during electoral periods. After the vote, the government should seek to reduce inter-communal hostility throughout the country by promoting citizenship above ethnic identities, making appointments on the basis of merit and denouncing the politicisation of differences between communities.

V. Conclusion

The presidential election on 7 October will take place in an unprecedented political and security climate for Cameroon. Lack of clarity on the country's future is worrying. Governance issues and the succession to Biya, now 85, are of pressing concern. Reducing the risk of violence during the election, including by security forces, is a precondition for putting Cameroon on track toward a peaceful transition. The priority for the incoming government will then be to organise a national dialogue to resolve the Anglophone crisis.

Nairobi/Brussels, 3 October 2018

Appendix A: Map of Cameroon





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