

# The Dynamics of Cameroon's Major National Dialogue and Attempts at Resolving the Anglophone Crisis since 2016: Understanding National and International Responses

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## Abstract

## Review Article

This paper revisits the historical roots and attempts by national and international parties in preventing and resolving the Anglophone Crisis since the last phase of its escalation in 2016. It argues that, the Major National Dialogue that was influenced by bottom-up pressures from national, regional, and international actors in the form of protests and armed confrontations, has not successfully addressed the conflict. While the Government thinks that the Dialogue at the Conference Centre in Yaoundé from 30 September to 4 October 2019 was successful, leaders of opposition parties, civil society activists and separatist groups responses show that it was a big failure and a “non-event” that had nothing to do with their struggle for separation and independence. The study which depended on both the rich primary and secondary sources that exist on post-independence Cameroon, argues that, the failure of both the Swiss-led and Canadian-led peace talks and the inability of the government to cooperate with external parties and separatist leaders has given way to more violence in the regions. The study concludes that, for peace and security to be restored, the government of Cameroon must put aside its interests and reorganize an inclusive, broad-based and transparent National Dialogue without preconditions, especially as the crisis has rendered the entire Anglophone regions ungovernable.

**Keywords:** Anglophone Crisis, National Dialogue, Government, Separatist, Resolution, Responses.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

National dialogues continue to make headlines around the world, having recently been proposed or convened in countries grappling with some of the world's most persistent and deadly conflicts. Motivations driving these processes in Africa are varied and complex. In some circumstances, leaders - civic or political elites - hold a genuine conviction that an inclusive conversation can forge progress toward elusive peace. In others, sitting leaders seek to cement their power, extend their terms, or co-opt opposition while placating critics under the guise of consultation and inclusion (Murray, 2021).

Many analysts in peace and conflict studies have relied on a few case studies to analyze National Dialogues and to theorize on the strategies for mediation and inclusion (Odendaal, 2021). In the last two decades, National Dialogues have continued to facilitate peacemaking processes, political reforms, and/or constitution-making processes across the globe from

Somalia (2000, 2002–2004), Afghanistan (2002, 2003–2004), and Nepal (2008–2012) to Egypt (2011), Yemen (2013–2014), and Tunisia (2013–2014) (Haugbølle, 2017). Every six months since October 2016, Myanmar has scheduled process similar to National Dialogues under the name “Union Peace Conference - 21st Century Panglong.” In Sudan (2015–2016) (Sudan Tribune, 2021) and Burundi (2015–2016) (United Nations Security Council, 2021) processes labelled National Dialogues have been set up, although they do exclude important opposition parties. These National Dialogues are increasingly regarded as a promising avenue for managing political crises and transitions by organizing broad-based and inclusive negotiations on a national scale (Paffenholz, 2017).

National Dialogues have been held throughout modern history and across the world under different names and in various contexts. In the case of Cameroon, it was called Major National Dialogue. The Head of State, Paul Biya in a message to the nation on 10

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September 2019 announced the holding of a Major National Dialogue on the situation in the North West and South West Regions. Although it will focus mainly on the crisis in these regions, the Dialogue concerned also the people of the other regions of Cameroon (PRC, 2021). The main aim of the dialogue was the resolve the Anglophone Crisis in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. The week-long event in Yaounde met with mixed reactions. Proposals that emerged from the dialogue, including the election of local governors, drew some support. Most separatist groups refused to attend. Skeptics point out that as of early 2020 Biya had yet to implement the recommendations. Violence and ongoing reports of human rights violations persisted. At the same time, various mediation initiatives sought to build on some of the agreements reached through the dialogue.

For decades, Anglophone Cameroonians in the area formerly known as Southern Cameroons had resented the central government for marginalizing them. In October 2016, major protest spearheaded by teachers and lawyers broke out in cities in the Anglophone regions. The Cameroonian government responded by deploying soldiers to quell the protests. In September 2017, Anglophone separatists began to take up arms against the Cameroonian government, and on 1 October 2017, the Southern Cameroons Ambazonia Consortium United Front declared the independence of the Federal Republic of Ambazonia (Wikipedia, 2021). The situation evolved into a military conflict between armed separatist groups and government forces called the Anglophone Crisis.

It was within this backdrop that, the President of the Republic of Cameroon announced a Major National Dialogue that took place between 30 September and 4 October 2019. The dialogue took place "within the context of the Constitution", with plans to include the Anglophone Cameroonian diaspora, thus ruling out the already proclaimed Ambazonian independence. However, many issues about the Major National Dialogue remain unclear and contested. The exact reasons triggering the Dialogue, the sub-themes imposed on the different panelists and participants, the profiles of its members, the various resolutions and recommendations, and the role of the Anglophone Cameroonian Diaspora, as well as the immediate effects that culminated in more violence in the North West and South West Regions, are all within the scope of our discussion.

By examining these debates, this paper is essential reading for those interested in National Dialogues and the broader issues of conflict, humanitarian emergencies, conflict resolution, intrastate violence and peacebuilding. This paper explores possible pathways to engage both parties and arrive at a lasting solution to the crisis. It starts by focusing on the conceptual framework and historical roots of the

Anglophone Crisis. It further examines the processes, recommendations and resolutions of the Major National Dialogue, paying particular attention to national and international responses of civil society groups including faith-based and traditional communities, political parties, and representatives of the armed forces, non-state armed actors as well as businesses, regional actors, women's organizations and government representatives.

## 2. Conceptualization

The objective of this conceptual framework is to contribute to a better understanding of the common features and characteristics of National Dialogues and the Anglophone Crisis. As the paper indicates, we shall be dealing with key words such as National Dialogue, and Anglophone Crisis.

National Dialogues are inclusive, multi-party negotiations in which large segments of society are represented, such as elites, political parties, organized civil society, women, youth, business, religious or traditional actors, and other relevant groups (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2016). With mandates that include political reforms, constitution-making, and peacebuilding, National Dialogues are convened to address issues of national concern, typically longstanding causes of conflict that have been brought to the fore by political protest or armed insurrection. Usually relying on a mix of plenary sessions and working groups, National Dialogues have clear structures as well as defined rules and procedures for dialogue and decision-making. They may last from several days to several years, and their size and composition can vary considerably, from a hundred participants to several thousand. National Dialogues are typically accompanied by broader societal consultations designed to communicate the results of negotiations and channel people's demands into the process. These may take the form of consultations, commissions, high-level problem-solving workshops, and/or referendums. This largescale inclusion of society within a National Dialogue helps generate ownership of its outcomes and enhance the sustainability of implementation (Stigant & Murray, 2015).

The Anglophone Crisis, formerly referred to as the Anglophone problem has often been contested by academics and politicians. The Anglophone area consists of two of the country's ten regions, the Northwest and the Southwest. It covers 16,364 sq km of the country's total area of 475,442 sq km and has about 5 million of Cameroon's 24 million inhabitants. Fanso (2017: 385) argues that, the Anglophone problem is the political, economic, social, and linguistic marginalization and reduction to the status of second-class citizens of the English-speaking (Anglophones) Cameroonians who originate from the former West Cameroon at unification until 1972 and who presently are the traditional inhabitants of the North West and South West Regions. To Ngoh (2019: 382), the Anglophone problem in

Cameroon was/is, first and foremost, a minority problem; linguistic/ language (Anglo-Saxon culture and values) minority as against the linguistic/language (Gaullic culture and values) majority. The Anglophone Crisis, therefore refers to decades of marginalization and desire by the people of English-speaking regions of Cameroon to return to federation, secede or achieve independence. The current Anglophone Crisis is therefore, a manifestation of frustration arising from both real and perceived discrimination and marginalization of the English-speaking minority (Sobseh, 2017).

### 3. Historical Roots of the Anglophone Crisis

The Anglophone Crisis which has caused considerable instability and human suffering, with more than 3,000 deaths linked to the conflict, and according to United Nations agencies, approximately 3,000,000 people are in need of humanitarian assistance, approximately 60,000 Cameroonian refugees have fled to Nigeria, and approximately 700,000 persons are internally displaced were caused by socioeconomic and political factors.

The first major factor concerns the existence of contested state structures. In trying to consolidate post-colonial national unity, Cameroon evolved through a series of revolutionary political stages which spanned across the federal and unitary system. In 1972, a constitutional referendum replaced the federal system with the unitary system. West Cameroon, which had federated in 1961 as an equal state, eventually ceased to exist. This gradually created an Anglophone political consciousness - the feeling of being exploited by the Francophone dominated state. Cameroon also went through several changes under the incumbent president, Paul Biya, who came to power in 1982.

These included a change of name from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon (exact appellation of former French Cameroon when it got its independence), a change of national flag from two-star design (symbol of the coming together of Francophone and Anglophone parts) to a single star, and the adoption of a new constitution in 1996 that transformed Cameroon into a decentralized unitary state. These changes explain why many protesting Anglophones feel that their cultural and historical uniqueness was trounced in the union (Gebremichael, 2020: 4). In fact, when President Paul Biya changed the name of the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon in 1984, a prominent Anglophone lawyer and first president of the BAR Association, Fon Dinka, called for the independence of the English-speaking North West and South West regions of Cameroon under the name Republic of Ambazonia (Konings, & Nyamnjoh, 1997).

In addition, the constitutional form of the state and the functioning of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government have, therefore, been

contested since the union. The contestants are opposition parties advocating for a change of government; federalist movements demanding a return to federalism; separatist movements fighting for secession and unionist movements standing against any change to the form of the state. This continued contestation of state structures threatens peace and stability in Cameroon as evidenced by the ongoing Anglophone crisis and highly polarized political climate.

Marginalisation and sociopolitical inequalities between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians were also responsible for the Anglophone Crisis. Anglophones in the South West and North West Regions, who make up only about 20% of Cameroon's 25.88 million population, have felt marginalized by the Francophone-dominated government in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. They accused the government of marginalizing the two English-speaking regions over Cameroon's other eight administrative regions. Politically, some argue that there is an under-representation of the Anglophone minority in key government positions as well as other government services. For instance, out of the 67 members of government, only three Anglophones occupy high-level cabinet positions (Africa News, 2021).

Centralisation, poor educational and judicial systems also contributed to the Anglophone Crisis that was provoked by the lawyers and teachers strike in 2016. Policies in the educational and judicial systems also created a fertile ground for the emergence and violent radicalization of those with grievances. There were 1,265 French speaking magistrates and only 227 English speaking magistrates in 2016 and out of 514 judicial officers, 499 were Francophone and 15 Anglophone. The inaction of the government to lawyers' demands of May 2016 led to the call for a four-day strike action from 11 to 14 October 2016 (Ngoh, 2019: 390). This strike was endorsed by teachers in Anglo-Saxon Universities in Cameroon. The government ignored the lawyers' demands and strike actions and on 21 November 2016, the Teachers' Trade Union in the North West and South West Regions declared an indefinite strike action until their grievances earlier tabled to the government were addressed.

However, it is important to note that, the Anglophone diaspora that did not initiate the Anglophone crisis, played a dominant role after the 17 January 2017 arrest of Consortium leaders to force the government to convene the Major National Dialogue in 2019. Internet-based campaigns contributed to mounting public anger and increased the popularity of diaspora ideas. The diaspora helped to give the crisis a higher profile at the international level by organising demonstrations outside the parliaments of Western countries and through diplomatic initiatives. This crisis also marked a generational renewal within the Anglophone movement and the diaspora.

#### 4. The Major National Dialogue: Objectives, Opening Ceremony and Themes

The Head of State, Paul Biya in a message to the nation on 10 September 2019 announced the holding of a Major National Dialogue on the situation in the North West and South West Regions. The decision to initiate the Major National Dialogue in Cameroon was influenced by bottom-up pressures for change in the form of protests and armed confrontations, and pressure from national, regional, and international actors. The debates took place at the Conference Centre in Yaoundé from 30 September to 4 October 2019 under the supervision of the Prime Minister, Dr Joseph Dion Ngute. According to Paul Biya, the Major National Dialogue:

In line with our Constitution, enable us to seek ways and means of meeting the high aspirations of the people of the North-West and South-West Regions, but also of all the other components of our Nation ... The dialogue, which will be chaired by the Prime Minister, Head of Government, will bring together a wide range of personalities: parliamentarians, politicians, opinion leaders, intellectuals, economic operators, traditional authorities, religious authorities, members of the diaspora, etc. Representatives of the Defence and Security Forces, armed groups and victims will also be invited (Paul Biya, 2019).

Despite hopes by some moderate anglophone activists that the talks would lead to the end of the conflict, the process was hampered from the start due to the refusal of several major secessionist leaders to participate. Indeed, a number of armed resistance leaders referred to the dialogue as nothing more than a performance aimed at returning to the unjust status quo and reconfirmed their position that only complete secession will end the conflict.

The main objective of the Major National Dialogue was to resolve the Anglophone Crisis. This crisis reached its apex in November 2016, when Common Law lawyers, teachers, students and civil society raised legitimate grievances over prolonged marginalization of Southern Cameroons, the desire to return to federalism or fight for secession and independence. These ideas were later bought and owned by Cameroonian Diaspora who reacted to these clarion calls by creating organisations, organizing internet-based campaigns, promoting fundraising and sponsoring armed groups against Government forces. The Major National Dialogue, according to President Paul Biya, would be inclusive and shall aim at addressing not just the Anglophone Crisis but “issues of national interest such as national unity, national integration and living together” (Bone & Nkwain, 2019).

While the September 2019 dialogue initiative by the Cameroonian Government is, in principle, a

positive step, it was necessary to ensure that dialogue was more participatory across the demographics and existing intersections of marginalization in Cameroonian society. But instead the government failed in this domain and came out with a number of themes and panelists for discussions.

The Dialogue was, as per the guidelines contained in the message of the Head of State of 10 September 2019 convening the Major National Dialogue, carried out in plenary and commission breakout sessions. During the launching ceremony on 30 September 2019, the Prime Minister, Head of Government and Chairperson of the Major National Dialogue, highlights the eight main themes that participants were to brainstorm on as delivered in the message by the Head of State on 10 September 2019, namely:

1. Bilingualism, cultural diversity and social cohesion;
2. Educational System;
3. Judicial System;
4. Return of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons;
5. Reconstruction and Development of conflict-affected areas;
6. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants;
7. Role of the Diaspora in the Crisis and in the Country's development;
8. Decentralisation and local development.

#### 5. Recommendations of the Major National Dialogue

The Major National Dialogue convened by the President of the Republic ended with a closing ceremony presided over by the chairperson of the Dialogue, Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute. The five days of deliberations by some six hundred delegates in eight commissions was sanctioned by recommendations that were presented to the public during the closing ceremony. The Recommendations specifically highlighted by the General Rapporteur of the Major National Dialogue, Felix Mbayu were summarized under the eight main themes and include the following:

##### 5.1 Bilingualism, cultural diversity and social cohesion

Members of this commission after frank discussions and deliberations came out with recommendations aimed at:

- Enhancing the practice of Bilingualism in all segments of society through the creation and implementation of programs starting from preschool ages;
- Enrooting cultural diversity through a strict implementation of regional balance and equitable access to public service and security forces;

- Conceiving and implementing a curriculum on Inter Community Fellowship, Rebuilding Fraternal Trust and Civic Engagement in an effort to strengthen national social cohesion;
- Passing legislation that spells out the equitable use of both official language in all areas of national life
- Developing and codifying principles for social dialogue, social cohesion and living together.

### 5.2 Educational System

Members of the commission in charge of the educational system in Cameroon after brainstorming during the Major Nation Dialogue came out with recommendations aimed at:

- Ensuring that educational reforms integrate the need to keep the two education systems afloat, buoyant and futuristic;
- Recognising the unique strengths and specificities of each subsystem;
- Building on the strengths of each one to train well rounded and excellent Cameroonian graduates who will excel wherever they go;
- Ensuring that Teachers' Trade Unions should work in collaboration with the Government;
- Regulating the proliferation of Teachers Trade Unions;
- Promoting better organization of the Trade Unions to ensure synergy from the regional to national level.

### 5.3 Judicial System

Members of the commission in charge of the judicial system in Cameroon after brainstorming during the Major Nation Dialogue came out with recommendations aimed at:

- Translating all legal instruments into both official languages and ensure their simultaneous publication in both official languages;
- Taking into account the prerequisite of English language proficiency and the mastery of the Common Law legal system when deploying judiciary staff to the North West and South West Regions;
- Setting up a Law School for training lawyers and all legal practitioners at large in Cameroon;
- Upgrading the Common Law Section of the Supreme Court of Cameroon into a fully-fledged Legal Bench comprising all sections dealing with specific matters of the Common Law;
- Improving mechanisms for legal cooperation in view of commencing proceeding to call to book those financial terrorism from foreign countries.

### 4.4 Return of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

This commission highlighted key issues concerning refugees and displaced persons aimed at:

- Setting up communication channels by the State for a better deployment of the army and freer movement of the people, as well as take measures for the construction of decent homes for displaced persons;
- Taking measures geared towards granting general amnesty to foster the return of refugees and internally displaced persons;
- Proceeding to the physical headcount of all displaced persons and come up with an estimate of their basic socio-economic needs – schools, health facilities, accommodation;
- Providing resettlement and reintegration kits to refugees and Internally Displaced Persons;

### 5.4 Reconstruction and development of conflict-affected areas

Recommendations in the domain of reconstruction and development of conflict-affected areas were geared towards:

- Formulating a vast programme for the Recovery, Reconstruction and Development of the North West, South West and Far North Regions, aimed at improving the living conditions of the populations and consolidating social cohesion and national unity through: the immediate resumption of projects whose works have been suspended over the past three years due to the crisis in the North West and South West Regions such as the Babajou-Bamenda road, the Loum-Tombel-Kumba Mundemba-Akwa Road;
- Rehabilitating public facilities and public infrastructure destroyed or rendered obsolete as a result of lack of use because of the crises, particularly in the areas of education, health, transport, energy, water and communications infrastructure;
- Reconstructing priority economic infrastructures in order to provide support or revive productive systems through revamping the public agro-industrial companies in the affected regions (CDC, PAMOL, UNVDA, SEMRY, SODECOTON);
- Compensating for losses suffered by private individuals, religious congregations, Chiefs' Palaces, communities and private production and service provision units as well as direct social assistance schemes for victims; the voluntarist creation of sustainable jobs for young people and women with a special focus on those from the crisis-affected areas.

### 5.6 Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants

Concerning disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, the commission adopted recommendations aimed at:

- Developing and implementing a holistic strategy of communication that would restore peace and reintegrate ex-combatants as envisaged by the Head of State, Paul Biya;
- Build bridges between young people, DDR and Defence and Security Forces, put an end to the production of home-made weapons and strengthen the fight against the proliferation of small arms;
- Taking care of young people in the spiritual, psychological and physical levels through detoxification programs following the excessive consumption of drugs and intensive indoctrination by some members of the diaspora;
- Integrate the Community Violence Reduction aspect into the DDR program.

### 5.7 Role of the Diaspora in the Crisis and in the Country's development

This commission identified the role of the diaspora in development of Cameroon and adopted measures aimed at:

- Revising and reforming the nationality code such that dual or multiple nationality be authorized;
- Adoption of the principle of parliamentary and governmental representation of the Diaspora (a ministry dedicated to the diaspora);
- Creation of a High Council of the Diaspora in the host countries with elected leaders, membership being conditioned by the possession of a consular card;
- Creation of a team responsible for mediation with radicalized members of the Diaspora;
- Creation of a transnational investment and development agency for the Diaspora;

### 5.8 Decentralisation and local development

Concerning decentralisation and local development, commission members recommended the:

- Granting of a Special Status to the North West and South West Regions in conformity with Section 62 Sub 2 of the Constitution which states that the law may take into consideration the specificities of certain Regions with regards to their organization and functioning;
- Putting in place of Regions as soon as possible;
- Disbursement of special allocation to each of the Councils in the North West and South West Regions to facilitate the effective resumption to certain agglomerations;
- Suppression of the provision for the appointment of Government Delegates provided for within the Special Regime applicable to certain agglomerations;

- Substantial reduction of the powers of the supervisory authority;
- In view of the reinforcement of the financial autonomy of local authorities, the Commission recommended that: effective implementation of Section 32 Sub 2 of the Law on the Orientation of Decentralisation which stipulates the finance law will determine, on the proposal of the government, the proportion of the State revenue dedicated to the Common Decentralisation Fund – with a margin of 10 – 15 of the State budget be allocated to the Councils; the waiver of the principle on the single treasury account which delays the effective transfer of funds to local authorities.

It is noteworthy to mention that some of the recommendations need to be specifically highlighted. These include the recommendation to:

- 1) Grant a Special Status to the North West and South West Regions in conformity with Section 62 Sub 2 of the Constitution which states that the law may take into consideration the specificities of certain Regions with regards to their organization and functioning;
- 2) Take specific measures to ensure equality of English and French in all aspects of national life;
- 3) Reinforce the autonomy of Decentralised Local Entities;
- 4) Improve upon the infrastructure of judicial services throughout the country;
- 5) Strengthen the Humanitarian Assistance Program to better serve Internally Displaced Persons;
- 6) Institute a special plan to reconstruct the conflict affected areas;
- 7) Popularise the Head of State's offer of amnesty to ex-combatants who drop their weapons and enter the reintegration process;
- 8) Create a team responsible for mediation with radicalized members of the Diaspora.

### 6. Implementation of the Recommendations of the Major National Dialogue

Some of the measures taken in line with the implementation of the recommendations of the Major National Dialogue (Teke, 2020) include:

- The release of about 300 persons detained for misdemeanours in connection with the crisis in the North West and South West Regions;
- The examination and adoption of the bill on the General Code on Decentralisation and Local Authorities in Parliament and its subsequent promulgation into law by the President of the Republic;
- The setting up of the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism;

- The organisation of elections of Regional Councillors scheduled for December 6, 2020;
- The creation of the National Advance School for Local Administration (NASLA);
- The creation of the Common Law Bench at the Supreme Court;
- The creation of the Common Law Section at the National School for Administration and Magistracy (ENAM);
- The fast tracking of the decentralisation process with the replacement of Government Delegates by City Mayors with an elective mandate;
- The Appointment and deployment of English-Speaking Magistrate;
- The Creation of the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development;
- The Presidential Plan for the Reconstruction and Development of the North West and South West Regions;
- The classification of the North West, South West and Far North Regions as Economical Distress Zones;
- The appointment of Anglophones from the North West and South West regions at the head of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and at the Ministry of Secondary Education respectively;
- The special *recruitment* of 1000 young *bilingual teachers in secondary schools*.

These measures amongst others were taken in implementation of the recommendations of Major National Dialogue to seek lasting solutions to the crisis in the North West and South West Regions (Amabo, 2021). According to the Government:

Despite these efforts by the Government, extremists in the diaspora and their local proxies set themselves to recuperate and divert the corporatist demands, transforming them into a secessionist project. Through overbidding, manipulation and various pressures, they began by thwarting government dialogue initiatives. Subsequently, they created and maintained a climate of fear and tension in the North-West and South-West regions through misinformation, the dissemination of messages of hatred and incitement to violence on social media. They finally instigated and financed the creation of armed groups and launched terrorist attacks against the public authorities and civilian populations, in the vain hope of carrying out their illusory project of partitioning Cameroon. The abuses and atrocities committed by these armed groups include: threats, intimidation, robberies, kidnappings, rackets, rapes, mutilations, beheadings, murders of members of the security forces, administrative authorities and defenceless civilians, the destruction of public infrastructure and

buildings, the burning of schools and hospitals, the prohibition of going to school .... (Major National Dialogue, 2019).

The government of Cameroon, in a bid to justify its decision to deploy the Defence and Security Forces, argued that, in the face of these intolerable acts by the armed groups, the forces took strong measures, often at the risk of their lives, to fulfil their duty to protect citizens and property. According to the government, "these measures are beginning to bear fruit with the improvement of security and the gradual resumption of economic activities in the North-West and South-West regions" (Ibid.)

## 7. National and International Responses

From 2018, the Anglophone Crisis drew increasing international attention, and became a challenge to Cameroon's foreign relations. Triggered by a violent crackdown by Government forces against unarmed civilians, the problem escalated from a low-scale insurgency to a crisis-like situation. While Cameroon enjoyed support from African countries, no country has openly supported the Ambazonian independence movements (Searcey, 2018). However, many countries have put pressure on Cameroon to talk to the separatists. On September 10, 2019, President Paul Biya announced in a televised speech that a "grand national dialogue" would take place "within the context of the Constitution between September 30 and October 4, 2019, hence ruling out Ambazonian independence. This was followed by national and international responses from individuals, separatist fighters, civil society activists, international institutions, organisations and Cameroonians in the diaspora.

### 7.1 Internal Responses

Internal actors that reacted to the Major National Dialogue included civil society groups including faith-based and traditional communities, political parties, and representatives of the armed forces, non-state armed actors as well as businesses, regional actors, women's organizations and government representatives. It is also important to note that some actors held different roles at the same time, such as individuals who were both a member of a political party and a minority group and these different affiliations may be more or less salient in any given context.

Civil society plays a crucial role in crisis management, peacemaking and constitution-making as well as political reform processes - often making it an important player in National Dialogues. Cameroon hosts several vibrant civil society groups in different parts of the country. Faith-based organizations were civil society entities with a religious ideology or mission, usually recruiting staff from among their own supporters with strong leaders. The emeritus Archbishop of Douala, Christian Cardinal Tumi responded to President Paul Biya's call for a Major National Dialogue:

*The Head of State if I understand him well is calling everybody to the dialogue table he didn't exclude anything; we should come on the dialogue table with intellectual honesty... We have always called for a national meeting to discuss the problem and calling for a national dialogue is a welcome initiative... people should go to the dialogue table in good faith to build and not to destroy Cameroon (Major National Dialogue, 2019).*

In the same light, renowned politicians and government representatives like *Government Delegate Bamenda, Ndumu Vincent Nji, said "I think the dialogue table will be a moment to press hard for effective decentralisation to be able to ensure that local development truly becomes a matter for the grassroots playing a front role (Ibid)," while others like Mayor of the Buea Council, Patrick Ekema felt:*

The message of the Head of State calling for dialogue comes at an appropriate time to bring down tempers. He is taking the responsibility as a father of 10 children (the ten different regions of the country) to set things right. As a father of the nation. He does an evaluation of the different problems submitted and looks for the most appropriate time to address them through the best means. I dare say what has been termed the Anglophone crisis will be history as dialogue has been announced for the end of this month. We expect those who represent the different strata of public opinion to come with concrete ideas during the dialogue (Ibid).

The chairperson of the national dialogue, Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute, during the Major National Dialogue said President Paul Biya was counting on the 1,000 delegates in attendance to come up with proposals that will make Cameroon a better place to live in for everyone, regardless of his or her region of origin. He further reacted by posing critical and intriguing questions:

Do we want future generations to remember that we were unable to find consensual answers to concerns that are not insoluble, or do we want to be considered as true peace makers in resolving this crisis that has deprived many of our children of their parents, their education and threatened their future, sometimes irreversibly? (Moki, 2019)

Organized political parties, other than the ruling government, immediately responded before and after the Major National Dialogue in Cameroon. The reaction of the leader of Cameroon's main opposition Party, Social Democratic Front (SDF), John Fru Ndi was very critical. Following an interview granted to him by the BBC Reporter in Yaounde, Killian Chimtom Ngala, important historical issues were raised. To him:

A return to the name United Republic of Cameroon is significant as it would go some way towards recognising the different histories of the different parts of the country. At independence, the Southern Cameroons (colonised by Britain) voted in a UN-organised plebiscite to be united with the Republic of Cameroon (formerly colonised by France). The new country the two entities created was called the Federal Republic of Cameroon. But the federation was scrapped in 1972 in a controversial referendum, giving rise to the United Republic of Cameroon. It is the abolition of this federal structure that lies at the core of the Anglophone problem. In 1984, President Paul Biya worsened the situation by scrapping the word "united" from the name of the country, and it became known simply as the Republic of Cameroon, which was the same name given at independence to the part of Cameroon colonised by France. What that meant was that the Anglophone entity had been annexed (Ngala, 2019).

However, civil society remains crucial despite these responses and constraints. For example, groups adopted various approaches to support those affected by the conflict and campaign for a resolution. These efforts include providing humanitarian relief such as food, health services, and shelter, especially for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Civil society groups in the affected regions —North West and South West Cameroon - also conduct peace campaigns and education efforts directed at both the government and non-state armed groups, drawing international attention to the conflict. These efforts include the "stop the killing," "back-to-school," "we want dialogue," and "ceasefire" campaigns mainly led by Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT). SNWOT has led demonstrations and organized press conferences in Cameroon's political capital, Yaoundé, and other regions demanding an immediate ceasefire and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Other local organizations, such as the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and the Network of Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa based in Cameroon, have continuously documented human rights abuses, including the February 14, 2020 Ngaruh Massacre carried out by government security forces in the North West Region. Thirteen children and one pregnant mother were killed in the incident. Other civil society groups have focused on peace education - training youth and women on mediation skills so that they can, in turn, educate family members in non-state armed groups to drop their weapons. This explains why, immediately President Paul Biya announced the Major National Dialogue, the *President of the National Youth Council, Fadimata Iyawa, reacted:*



We have proposed three levels of the involvement of Cameroonian youths in the national dialogue. We have indoor, outdoor and around the door involvement. This means that all young people in Cameroon will be involved in the dialogue. Today we have been consulted so that we will be stakeholders. We will have youth delegates at all stages beginning from subdivisions, divisions and regions. We will also consult the young people in the Diaspora so that our voice be heard and we bring on the table proposals of the youths in order to promote the atmosphere of peace. This is because we need to be part of the history of our country (Major National Dialogue, 2019).

*However, one of the most outstanding responses came from the spokesperson of former separatist fighters, Yannick Kawa Kawa. He sought forgiveness and asked to be part of the dialogue because he thinks Cameroon could solve its problems, especially as he thinks the French domination of English speakers that caused the crisis. During the Major National Dialogue, he said:*

There are companies located around our areas [English-speaking regions] but most of those companies are run by French-speaking Cameroonians. We in our own areas do not have the opportunity to work in those companies. Almost all the administrators are French-speaking Cameroonians. Why were we treated that way? Those are the reasons why we picked up guns to fight against our government (Moki, 2019).

## 7.2 International Responses

African and Western actors' reactions for the Major National Dialogue in Cameroon varied tremendously. Their passive involvement provided an inclusive, broad, and participatory official negotiation framework, which could resolve the political crisis in Cameroon. International reaction has been muted, but has nevertheless pushed the government to adopt certain measures, including creating a National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism; creating new benches for Common Law at the Supreme Court and new departments at the National School of Administration and Magistracy; recruiting Anglophone magistrates and 1,000 bilingual teachers; and turning the internet back on after a 92-day cut (International Crisis Group, 2017).

In Africa, several individuals, countries and institutions reacted to the Anglophone Crisis, especially following the by President Paul Biya for a Major National Dialogue. According to Jude Mutah (2022), the famous mantra "African solutions to African problems" explains why many Africans expected entities in Africa to play a leading role in addressing the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. However, African regional organizations and individual countries have been remarkably discreet and, in some instances, have even sided with the

government of Cameroon. The African Union (AU), the foremost African continental institution, has issued only a few statements. In 2017, former Chairperson of the AU Commission, Her Excellency Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, expressed concerns about the crisis. She called for restraint and encouraged dialogue to resolve the sociopolitical and economic issues at the root of the war. She also emphasized respect for the law - in particular, the right to conduct peaceful demonstrations.

In 2018, current African Union Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat visited Cameroon for two days and met with several high-level government officials, including President Biya. While the discussions focused on issues affecting the region and Cameroon more broadly, the Chairperson lauded Biya's humanitarian efforts and reiterated the AU's "commitment to the unity and territorial integrity of Cameroon." He rejected violence and called for inclusive dialogue to facilitate a peaceful resolution. Beyond the Chairperson's visit and weightless statements, however, the AU has not engaged in any meaningful efforts to improve the situation. This explains why, *Ebba Kalondo, the Spokesperson of the Commission's Chairperson of African Union Commission Addis Ababa, on 11 September 2019, said:*

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, welcomes the commitment of the President of the Republic of Cameroon, H.E. Paul Biya, to organize a national dialogue to resolve the crisis in the two English-speaking regions of the country. He encourages and calls upon all Cameroonian stakeholders, including the diaspora and armed groups, to take part in this national dialogue and to seize this opportunity to discuss the root causes of this crisis. The Chairperson reiterates the readiness of the African Union Commission to support Cameroon in the search for a consensual and lasting solution to preserve Cameroon's unity and integrity (Major National Dialogue, 2019).

Amnesty International Africa Director, Netsanet Belay, blames the conflict on "the persistent inability of the AU to marshal the determination, political will and courage to hold member states to account for clear violations of AU principles, values and standards on especially human rights" (Durmaz, 2019). Not surprisingly then, most African countries have either remained silent or taken stances against United Nations (UN) intervention. African non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Cote D'Ivoire, and South Africa) all voted against attempts to bring the crisis up for discussion. Nigeria clearly expressed its support for the government in its fight against the separatists. President Muhammadu Buhari stated unequivocally that "Nigeria will take necessary measures within the ambit of the law to ensure that its territory is not used as a staging area to destabilise

another friendly sovereign country" (*Journal du Cameroun*, 2019).

In contrast, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in April 2019 which "calls in particular for the Government to organise an inclusive political dialogue aimed at finding a peaceful and lasting solution to the crisis in the Anglophone regions" and "urges the African Union and the Economic Community of the Central African States to push for the organisation of such talks and calls for the European Union (EU) to stand ready to support this process" (European Parliament, 2019). The United States has also been involved in some track one diplomacy. In March 2019, the U.S. Undersecretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, visited Cameroon and held talks with President Paul Biya. In an interview with Radio France Internationale (RFI), Nagy underscored that the government needed to be "more serious in their management of the Anglophone Crisis" (Tantoh, 2019). Meanwhile, in July 2019 the U.S. House of Representatives passed Resolution 358 calling on the belligerent parties to: "respect the human rights of all Cameroonian citizens, to end all violence, and to pursue a broad-based dialogue without preconditions to resolve the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions" (Govtrack, 2019).

France has striven to maintain a low profile since the start of the conflict. Some argue that it even supported the government's repressive response for strategic, political, and economic reasons. However, confronted with pressure at home and abroad as well as an escalating conflict, France has called for a political solution and encouraged the Anglophone Conference, which the Cameroon government refused to grant in 2018. President Biya has also met with French diplomats at length. French President Emanuel Macron visited Cameroon in April 2022 and held talks with President Paul Biya, although the discussion focused on broader issues facing the country and the subregion. In short, as a critical stakeholder, France is expected to do more but has not yet delivered.

Although known for its neutrality in global affairs, Switzerland has engaged in a mediation process to end the conflict. In collaboration with the Humanitarian Dialogue (a Swiss NGO), the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs has held several meetings with Cameroon's separatist leaders since 2019. Swiss officials have also traveled to the country, meeting with Cameroon government officials and civil society actors to better understand the dynamics of the conflict. In March 2019, for example, the Swiss president traveled to Cameroon and proposed an initiative to serve as mediator in a bid to end the conflict through an inclusive negotiation process. However, President Biya's reaction was ambiguous. While the United Nations and the United States backed the Swiss-led process, the Cameroon government only implicitly committed to the initiative. This year, Biya officially suspended its

participation in the Swiss mediation effort out of distrust, instead inviting Switzerland and interested stakeholders to support Cameroon in implementing the resolutions of the largely ineffectual 2019 National Dialogue (Mutah, 2019).

On January 30, 2023, Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister, Melanie Joly, issued an announcement on its role as mediator in a peace process aimed at resolving the ongoing crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and noted that three pre-talks had already taken place in Ontario and Quebec to that effect. This was endorsed by the United States and United Kingdom governments and Cameroonians were very hopeful about this new development. Many analysts opined that the Canadian led peace talks had succeeded in bringing more momentum than earlier efforts by Switzerland. However, the government of Cameroon has denied claims of entrusting any foreign country with the role of mediator. Anglophone armed separatists responded to government's statement with renewed campaigns for violence and attacks on government forces in English speaking regions (Kinkoh & Begealawuh, 2023).

Multilateral responses have not been effective either. For example, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres met with Biya in Cameroon in 2017. The UN has also urged both sides to facilitate humanitarian access and engage in inclusive dialogue to end the conflict. It has even offered to mediate. However, the conflict has yet to secure the required number of votes to feature on the Security Council's agenda. In 2017, the conflict managed to feature at a biannual meeting of the UN Security Council. *Spokesperson of the UN Secretary General, Stephane Dujarric, on 10 September 2019, said:*

The Secretary-General welcomes the announcement made today by President Paul Biya on the launch of a national dialogue process in Cameroon. He encourages the Government of Cameroon to ensure that the process is inclusive and addresses the challenges facing the country. He calls on all Cameroonian stakeholders, including the Diaspora, to participate in this effort. The Secretary-General reiterates the readiness of the United Nations to support the dialogue process (Major National Dialogue, 2019).

The United States, the United Kingdom, and other vital Western actors demanded dialogue, investigation of the human rights abuses committed by both sides, and humanitarian access for the UN and other rights organizations. However, the UN's apparent lukewarm attitude towards resolving the crisis remains widely criticized. On 11 September 2019, *the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Patricia Scotland, reiterated that:*

I encourage a process that will enjoy the trust of all parties and that addresses the root causes of

the crisis in order to bring sustained peace. The Commonwealth stands ready to assist, and I call on all parties to participate fully in the process. The people of the northwest and southwest regions, children in particular, deserve a return to normal life free from fear and gross violations of human rights and atrocities perpetuated by parties to the conflict, including armed groups (Ibid).

In addition to the responses from multilateral institutions, international civil society organizations have tried to improve the situation. For example, human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group have conducted extensive research and offered policy recommendations to the government of Cameroon, international policymakers, and other key stakeholders on the best ways to end the conflict (Mutah, 2019). In addition, the United States Institute of Peace conducted a rigorous conflict analysis, undertook a scoping mission to Cameroon, and engaged with separatist leaders and Cameroon government officials to better understand the situation.

Finally, the reactions of the Anglophone Diaspora Community to the Anglophone Crisis and President Paul Biya's call for Major National Dialogue in 2019 were outstanding. Mark Baretta, one of the separatist leaders very active on social media announced that he was pulling out, saying that:

The only way to have real negotiations is to hold them on neutral territory ... Some of us were even lenient to say ok you have called for dialogue in Yaoundé and we can come and say we are for independence but we can do that through our leadership in jail. But till now, Biya has not taken any step (Nwenfor, 2019).

Among the 16 separatist leaders invited, those heading armed groups such as Ebenezer Akwanga and Cho Ayaba also snubbed the talks. Ebenezer Akwanga told Agence France-Press (AFP) that the event was a "smokescreen for the international community rather than an attempt to secure a complete and lasting solution ... to the annexation of our country, Southern Cameroons" (Nwenfor, 2019). Eric Tataw responded to Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) World that:

The US government wants dialogue and we think that we should go for dialogue but Paul Biya cannot tell us that we are insulting Cameroon because we are not Cameroonians. We are two separate countries, he knows that and the world knows that ... We are not forming our own country; we are just restoring our country. The right to self-determination is just what we are asking. We want the world to assist us in carrying out decolonization of southern Cameroon (Ibid).

However, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), these separatist leaders have expressed willingness to hold talks with the government but in the presence of an international mediator and in a foreign country with the terms for secession the main item on the agenda. This has been outrightly rejected by the government of Cameroon, urging the Separatist leaders to intensify their struggle for an independent Southern Cameroons through violence.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Major National Dialogue in Cameroon that was influenced by bottom-up pressures for change in the form of protests and armed confrontations, and pressure from national, regional, and international actors. It argues that, the dialogue that took place at the Conference Centre in Yaoundé from 30 September to 4 October 2019 under the supervision of the Prime Minister, Dr Joseph Dion Ngute, has not successfully addressed the conflict, pushing many experts to question its effectiveness. According to the government of Cameroon, the dialogue was successful, and efforts are underway to implement some of the above resolutions. To many secessionists and separatist groups, the 2019 dialogue process was a "non-event" that has nothing to do with their "struggle" for an independent state called "Ambazonia" (Kinkoh & Begealawuh, 2023). Exchange experts on their part, describe the 2019 major national dialogue as a government monologue. This is because the national dialogue process was organized, run, and managed by the government who imposed their agenda on the proceedings and gave almost no room for other stakeholders' input into the process. The resolutions including granting a "special status" to the North West and South West Regions, enhancing the practice of bilingualism and national social cohesion, educational reforms, reforms in the judicial system, reconstruction and development of conflict-affected areas, decentralization, amongst others, have failed to address the conflict, as many schools in the North West and South West still remain closed and inaccessible, ghost towns have not stopped, several attacks by armed groups, looting, kidnappings and killings are the order of the day. In addition, both the Swiss-led peace talks and Canadian-led peace talks have failed, and the prospects for peace in the country's restive English-speaking regions are still distant and violence has increased in a more dangerous manner. The study concludes that, in order to restore peace in Cameroon's restive Anglophone regions, the state must put aside its interests and be willing to have an inclusive negotiated, transparent and fair settlement of the conflict with all stakeholders and parties concerned.

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