



Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue

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What's new? Fighting is spreading between security forces and militants from Cameroon's English-speaking minority. The government largely rejects Anglophone grievances, while armed militants appear inclined to continue fighting. The Catholic Church, representing nearly a third of Cameroonians, could be an arbitrator, but its clergy have taken divergent positions on the crisis.

Why does it matter? Other than the Catholic clergy, there are few prospective peacemakers. If no one fills that role, the separatist sentiment already voiced by many Anglophones will continue to grow, fuelling further violence and exacerbating the ongoing insurgency in the Anglophone regions, with elections in late 2018 a flashpoint.

What should be done? The Church should bridge its divides and state its impartiality on the thorniest question facing Anglophone regions – federalism versus decentralisation. A clergy able to project a position of neutrality could work with other trusted actors to mediate between Anglophone leaders and the state, and stem a dangerous and growing crisis.

I. Overview

Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, which began in October 2016, has morphed into conflict between security forces and increasingly well-armed separatists fighting in the name of the country's marginalised English-speaking minority. The separatist impulse among Anglophones is growing as President Paul Biya's government shrugs off the community's historical grievances. Violence has spread: more than 100 civilians and at least 43 members of the security forces have reportedly died in the last seven months, as have an unknown number of armed militants.

Some evidence suggests that separatists control territory; 34,000 refugees are sheltering in precarious conditions in Nigeria and about 40,000 persons are displaced in the Southwest Anglophone region. Many militants apparently believe they are better served by fighting in order to negotiate with Biya's government from a position of strength. The African Union and Western powers have called for dialogue. The government agrees on the need for talks, but refuses Anglophone activists' calls

for outside mediation and opposes any discussion of federalism. It has jailed Anglophone leaders with whom it was formerly talking.

The Catholic Church could help break this dangerous stalemate. Present in all ten of Cameroon's regions, the Church is one of the country's strongest institutions. Almost a third of Cameroonians are Catholic, and the Church operates a dense network of schools and hospitals. Cameroonians take its views seriously. At present, however, its public divisions, particularly between Anglophone and Francophone clergy, stand in the way of it playing a constructive role. It is not too late for the Church to bridge these divides. Anglophone and Francophone bishops should come together in a public statement to affirm their neutrality on the issue most contentious in the crisis – that of federalism versus decentralisation – and state their willingness to mediate.

The Church also should renew its calls for an end to violence and for Anglophone leaders and the government to enter negotiations. Given that, for now, direct talks between the two sides appear unlikely, the Church, if it is able to project neutrality and win trust on both sides, might play a behind-the-scenes role to allow for indirect communication between them. It could usefully push for prisoner release and some form of amnesty for Anglophone leaders who have fled the country, both likely prerequisites for talks. It could continue working together with other religious institutions, such as the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, which in January 2017 stated its readiness to mediate, and the Cameroon Baptist Convention, as well as credible civil society associations and traditional rulers. As violence appears set to escalate, particularly ahead of Cameroon's 2018 presidential election, potential mediators and peacemakers are few. The Church should overcome its divisions, position itself as a neutral arbiter and help resolve an increasingly deadly and worrisome crisis.

II. A History of Political Engagement and Divisions

Cameroon's Catholic clergy have often been divided at times of political turmoil. The best-known case dates to the 1970s, involving a split over the fate of Archbishop Albert Ndongmo, whom the government claimed supported the insurgent Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (Union des peuples du Cameroon, UPC).¹ The government at the time, headed by President Ahmadou Ahidjo, asked Ndongmo to negotiate with the insurgents, but then arrested him for collaborating with them, and in 1970 condemned him to death (a sentence later commuted to life in prison). Although priests drafted a memorandum denouncing Ndongmo's incarceration, Jean Zoa, the archbishop of the Cameroonian capital, Yaoundé, who was close to the regime, refused to sign it. When Ahidjo pardoned Ndongmo in 1975, Zoa's archdiocese declined to join the rest of the Church in celebrating his release.²

¹ The UPC was an anti-colonial movement that after independence in 1960 continued battling the government of Ahmadou Ahidjo (the first president of Cameroon, serving from 1960 to 1982), which it called a colonial lackey. For full background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°160, *Cameroon: Fragile State?*, 25 May 2010.

² Jean-Claude Djereke and Kâ Mana, *L'Engagement politique du clergé en Afrique noire* (Paris, 2001); Jean-François Bayart, "La fonction politique des Eglises au Cameroun", *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 3, no. 23 (1973), pp. 514-536.

Conflicts within the Catholic Church often have an ethnic dimension, pitting priests from the influential Bamiléké community against those hailing from other groups. Rivalries over postings and promotions are common. In 1987, a group of mainly ethnic Bassa priests in the Douala archdiocese wrote a memorandum to the Vatican criticising the appointment of Bamiléké bishops to dioceses outside their region of origin.³ Among the appointments drawing their ire was that of Christian Tumi, who comes from the Northwest region and is a member of the “grasslands” ethnic groups to which the Bamiléké are related, to the position of archbishop of Garoua, in Cameroon’s North region. The memorandum described Tumi, in barely disguised pejorative terms, as “Anglophone Bamiléké”.⁴

A few years later, the Catholic Church was divided once more as Cameroon began a turbulent transition to multiparty politics, replete with crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters. In 1990, the Cameroon Peoples’ Democratic Movement (which had been ruling since 1960, albeit under a different name) organised nationwide rallies against what it termed the “precipitous” introduction of multiparty politics. In Yaoundé, the rallies ended on 30 March with a mass held in the cathedral led by Archbishop Zoa. Tumi, by then a cardinal and figurehead of the democracy movement, objected to what he considered an authoritarian manoeuvre.⁵

On 26 May 1990 oppositionists launched a new party in Bamenda named the Social Democratic Front. After police killed six of its supporters that same day, the Anglophone archbishop of Bamenda, Paul Verdzekov, organised a memorial service in his cathedral. In response, Archbishop Zoa convened a counter-mass in the Yaoundé cathedral to, as he put it, “cleanse the image of the Catholic Church from the unholy service” in Bamenda.⁶

The Catholic Church, or individual clergy, have continued to express political views since the 1990s, notably concerning the conduct of elections. And differences have persisted between conservative clergy close to the authorities in Yaoundé and those more willing to speak out.⁷ The Church has established itself as a leading actor in Cameroon’s politics, but such divisions continue to undermine its potential to play a positive role. The Anglophone crisis is no exception.

³ “Des évêques Bamilékés indésirables à Yaoundé”, Camerounweb.com, 10 August 2017.

⁴ Jean-François Bayart and Achille Mbembe, “La bataille de l’archidiocèse de Douala”, *Politique Africaine*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1987), pp. 77-84. This ethnic divide endured into the 1990s. In July 1999, when André Wouking, a Bamiléké, was appointed archbishop of Yaoundé (a place many from the Beti ethnic group see as their territory), Christians protested on the Bafoussam-Yaoundé highway the day of his inauguration. Pascal Touoyem, *Dynamiques de l’ethnicité en Afrique : éléments pour une théorie de l’Etat multinational* (Bamenda, 2014), p. 62; Jean-François Bayart, Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh, “Autochtonie, démocratie et citoyenneté en Afrique”, *Critique Internationale*, vol. 1, no. 10 (2001).

⁵ When Crisis Group met him in his Douala diocese in 2010, Cardinal Tumi bemoaned the ethnic splits in the Church and the stalling of the country’s democratic development.

⁶ Charles Manga Fombad, “State, Religion and Law in Cameroon: Regulatory Control, Tension and Accommodation”, *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 57, no. 1, 1 March 2015, pp. 18-43.

⁷ Another example was during the presidential election in 2011. Cardinal Tumi decried electoral fraud, but the archbishop of Yaoundé sent a congratulatory message to the head of state and organised an ecumenical thanksgiving at the cathedral of Yaoundé. Crisis Group interviews, senior clergymen, Yaoundé, March 2018.

III. The Church in the Anglophone Crisis

In addition to ethnic divides, the Church suffers from fissures between Anglophones and Francophones. There are five ecclesiastic provinces in the country, all under the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon (NECC). Four of them are French-speaking, while the ecclesiastic provinces of Bamenda administers the predominantly English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions, under the aegis of the Bamenda Provincial Episcopal Conference (BAPEC). Not surprisingly, the six bishops of the Anglophone regions express more concern about the crisis than do those in Francophone areas, reflecting anger among the Anglophone flock at the central government's actions and the sympathy of the clergy in Anglophone regions for Anglophone grievances.⁸

Two issues related to the crisis are particularly divisive among the clergy. The first concerns the structure of the state, namely whether to advocate for decentralisation, federalism or even independence for a new Anglophone state. The national ecclesiastical hierarchy supports decentralisation within a unified state. Touring the affected regions in May 2017, Archbishop Samuel Kleda, president of the NECC, asserted that the conference had asked the government to implement decentralisation, as stipulated by the 1996 constitutional law.⁹

In contrast, some Anglophone priests have gone so far as to call for the creation of a new state. In April 2017, for instance, Father Wilfred Emeh of the Kumba diocese called for the restoration of the statehood of Southern Cameroons (he proposed federalism as a step toward achieving independence). The next month, Father Gerald Jumbam of the Kumbo diocese wrote an open letter to Archbishop Kleda supporting full independence for the Anglophone areas and calling federalists “cowards standing on the fence”.¹⁰ He was joined later in May by Father David Fomanka, former Catholic education secretary of Mamfe diocese, who advocated for independence in an open letter to “Southern Cameroonians”.¹¹

These three priests all now live abroad. Their stance undoubtedly reflects the frustrations of a section of the Anglophone population. But the vast majority of Anglophone Cameroon's 350 priests are more cautious, saying little in public and privately

⁸ On these grievances, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°250, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, 2 August 2017. About ten rebel militias and self-styled “self-defence groups” currently operate in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, with at least 500 active members and fighters. Some, like the Ambazonia Defence Forces, Tigers of Ambazonia, Ambazonia Restoration Army, Southern Cameroons Defence Forces and Lebialem Red Dragons, are equipped with modern assault rifles. Crisis Group interviews, journalists, NGO employees, security forces personnel, Douala, Buea and Bamenda, March 2018.

⁹ “Cameroon – Anglophone crisis: Archbishop Samuel Kleda on a ‘seductive’ mission in NW and SW”, *Actu Cameroun*, 6 May 2017; Richard Moncrieff, “Cameroon's Anglophone crisis is escalating. Here's how it could be resolved”, *African Arguments*, 27 September 2017.

¹⁰ “An open letter from Father Gerald to the president of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, Archbishop Samuel Kleda”, *Cameroon Concord*, 6 May 2017.

¹¹ Southern Cameroons, or the former British Southern Cameroons, was the name of the Anglophone regions before independence and reunification with former French Cameroon. See Father Wilfred Emeh, “We need restoration of our statehood”, *BaretaNews*, 18 April 2017; “Form your own government now: Rev Father Fomanka tells Southern Cameroonians”, *BaretaNews*, 29 May 2017.

supporting either federalism or effective decentralisation – not independence.¹² Furthermore, most respect the Church's hierarchy and the principle that the voice of the Church should be heard through the bishops.¹³

The second division is over whether to support a school boycott declared in January 2017 by Anglophone militants, along with a general strike (they vowed to turn cities into "ghost towns"). The boycott continued throughout 2017 but, in 2018, classes have resumed at many schools, especially in cities. Fomanka, Emeh and Jumbam support the boycott, while Bishop George Nkuo, president of the BAPEC and effective head or spokesperson of the Anglophone part of the Church, disagrees, arguing that children's education must be respected as a primordial mission of the Church.¹⁴ In this he agrees with the national Church.

Still, some disagreements remain at the level of the bishops. In May 2017, Archbishop Kleda pressured Anglophone bishops to ensure that classes resume immediately. Bishop Immanuel Bushu of Buea had a different opinion. Without supporting the boycott, he did say that it expressed the wish of parents and that progress toward resolving the crisis, and thus reopening schools, could better be made if the government released detainees.¹⁵

The position of leading figures within the Church against the boycott has provoked the anger of Anglophone militants and prompted them to threaten clergy. They also have set fire to schools not taking part in the boycott. Militants burned down two Catholic primary schools in Tobin and Kumbo on 5 August 2017 and badly damaged the Sacred Heart Catholic College in Bamenda on 18 September.¹⁶

For the most part, Francophone bishops have remained silent about the crisis, allowing Archbishop Kleda to speak on behalf of the national Church. Nor did they speak out when a government-fabricated consortium of parents filed a series of lawsuits against Anglophone clergymen, accusing them of aiding the school boycott. In April 2017, the Bamenda Court of First Instance summoned several Anglophone bishops, as well as the moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and the executive president of the Cameroon Baptist Convention, in connection with this case, with state prosecutors adding their own charges of endangering national unity, accusing the bishops of making statements that had paralysed the schools. A court in Buea summoned bishops from the Southwest shortly thereafter. Charges have since been dropped, but the government has proved itself willing to put clergy on trial for political reasons.¹⁷

¹² "Memorandum presented to the head of state, His Excellency President Paul Biya, by the bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Bamenda on the current situation of unrest in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon", BAPEC, 22 December 2016. Crisis Group interviews, senior Catholic clergy, Buea and Bamenda, March 2018.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, senior Catholic clergy, Buea and Bamenda, March 2018; Cardinal Christian Tumi, Douala, March 2018.

¹⁴ "Cameroon Anglophone bishops call for school resumption following calls from PTAs", Cameroon schoolnews.wordpress.com, 21 July 2017. See also Pope John XXIII, *Mater et magistra*, 15 May 1961.

¹⁵ "The meeting convened by Archbishop Kleda in Buea ended in a deadlock", *Cameroon Concord*, 3 May 2017. Crisis Group interviews, senior Catholic clergy, Douala, Buea and Bamenda, March-September 2017.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior clergyman, Buea, May 2017.

¹⁷ Cameroon – Anglophone crisis: Government drags Catholic bishops to court over stalemate on school resumption", *Actu Cameroun*, 15 April 2017.

As in the past, the Church is caught between the Yaoundé government and its opponents on the ground. The top-down pressure came even from the papal nuncio (recently replaced), who pushed Anglophone bishops to reopen schools, but expressed no concern about either the schools' safety from arson or the politically motivated prosecution of bishops.¹⁸ In Yaoundé diplomatic circles, the pope's emissary was seen as having taken the government's side in the crisis.¹⁹

Despite the polarisation, Anglophone and Francophone bishops share some views, and important Church figures are trying to find middle ground. For example, despite differences in tone, both Anglophone and Francophone bishops condemned the heavy military crackdown on civilians between September and October 2017.²⁰ This precedent indicates that greater coherence, and a more constructive role for the Church, are possible.

IV. The Church's Potential as Mediator

In order to play a more effective role and help stem an insurrection and counter the risk of civil war in Anglophone Cameroon, the Catholic Church must overcome its internal divisions or at least find enough common ground to project a position of neutrality. Several commentators have called upon the Church to mediate between the warring sides, as it has done in neighbouring countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic.²¹ If it is to play that role, the Church should avoid taking firm positions on the main issues that divide the protagonists.

To this end, bishops, Anglophone and Francophone, could usefully come together and issue a public statement, declaring that they remain neutral on the main issues of concern, especially federalism versus decentralisation, underlining that Anglophone feelings of marginalisation have some justification, denouncing human rights abuses and calling for restraint by all sides. They could then state their interest in mediating the crisis. The details of such mediation would have to be worked out away from the public glare. Such an approach would potentially boost public trust (especially in Anglophone areas) in the church, while helping to remove the spotlight from the more radical and polarising positions taken by some priests.

Ultimately, direct talks between the main protagonists are the most promising way to avoid escalation. But the current violence and polarisation suggest that their prospects, even with mediators involved, are slim at present.²² Instead, the most logical step for the Church, if it is able to position itself as a trusted arbiter, would be to talk separately to both sides to understand their differences in opinion and their red lines. According to Crisis Group sources, such parallel consultations may already be

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Catholic clergymen, Douala and Buea, March 2018.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yaoundé, February-March 2018.

²⁰ "Ambazonia crisis: Roman Catholic bishops fail to see eye to eye", *Cameroon Intelligence Report*, 11 January 2018. On the crackdown, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°130, *Cameroon's Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures*, 19 October 2017.

²¹ Crisis Group observations of social media discussions of the Anglophone crisis throughout 2017.

²² Crisis Group Statement, "Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: Dialogue Remains the Only Viable Solution", 21 December 2017.

happening, albeit in a dispersed way.²³ They should be strengthened through better coordination between bishops, so that those involved can speak for the Church as a whole, and potentially developed into shuttle diplomacy, with the goal of increasing understanding and reducing the distance between the sides in preparation for direct talks. To do so, the Church could usefully team up with other denominations, especially the influential Presbyterian Church, which has indicated its willingness to play a role and which already collaborates well with the Catholic Church.²⁴ It could also involve the Cameroon Baptist Convention, as well as credible civil society associations and traditional rulers.

Even ahead of direct talks, the Church likely will have to address the exile of Anglophone activists. Many want to return home but are understandably frightened by the government's continued imprisonment of Anglophone militants. It could push for some form of amnesty, prisoner releases and guarantees for returnees, perhaps in exchange for a ceasefire from the Anglophone armed militias.

The precise agenda of eventual talks between Anglophone leaders and the government cannot be determined in advance. But even preliminary discussions need to take account of the Anglophones' deep feelings of alienation. The government cannot continue to dismiss this sentiment and should be open to discussions of federalism, even if that is not the only option for addressing Anglophone concerns (decentralisation that devolves real authority to regions likely would go a long way in that direction).

The issue of separatism is trickier. A growing number of militants, tired of what they see as Yaoundé's bad faith, are attracted to this option (which they tend to term "restoration of statehood"). But it remains a red line for Yaoundé, and supporting secession remains a treasonable offense.²⁵ At the same time, separatist movements have established themselves on the ground and cannot simply be ignored. Whether the government's engagement in genuine dialogue with Anglophone leaders and either meaningful decentralisation or federalism would suck the oxygen from those movements remains uncertain. But without talks and the devolution of power in some form to Anglophone and other regions, separatist sentiment is very likely to continue growing and the conflict to escalate further with a risk of mutating into civil war.

V. Conclusion

Cameroon faces critical risks going into this electoral year. Boko Haram remains active in the Far North, instability prevails along the eastern border with the Central African Republic and popular discontent continues to roil large cities. But the insurgency in Anglophone areas, and the clumsy government response, is now the main threat to the country's stability. A negotiated solution is vital. The Catholic Church, if

²³ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yaoundé, March 2018.

²⁴ According to several priests and pastors, there is far more unity between the Anglophone Catholic bishops, the Presbyterian Church, and the Baptist convention than with the Francophone bishops, to the point that the three institutions in Anglophone areas have an almost unanimous position. Crisis Group phone interviews, Anglophone priests and pastors, April 2018.

²⁵ "Law n° 2016/007 of 12 July 2016 relating to the penal code", Article 111, Republic of Cameroon, 12 July 2016.

it can resolve or keep under wraps its internal divisions and project neutrality, would be well placed to help bring it about. International actors should support Church initiatives and encourage greater unity among the clergy. But the onus is also on the Church itself to display greater coherence.

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Appendix A: Map of Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis



Appendix B: Timeline

1 January 1960

The Francophone territory of Cameroon gains independence from France, becoming the Republic of Cameroon. Anglophone areas gain independence from Britain in October 1961 and merge with the new state as the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

20 May 1972

After a referendum changing the country's official name to the United Republic of Cameroon, then President Ahidjo intensifies centralisation, suppresses federalism and causes outrage among Anglophones.

March 1984

President Paul Biya changes the country's official name back to the Francophone-era Republic of Cameroon and removes from the flag the second star representing the Anglophone part of the federation.

11 October 2016

Tensions break open as Anglophone lawyers from Northwest and Southwest regions lead strikes to demand the full restoration of the common law system in their regions. The demands are ignored by the government, which uses force against the marching lawyers.

21 November 2016

Teachers go on strike in Bamenda, and thousands of Anglophones march to demand respect for their educational system. Police and army respond violently, shooting and killing at least two.

8 December 2016

Violent clashes erupt in Bamenda between anti-government inhabitants and security forces. Catholic bishops publish a memorandum listing Anglophone grievances. The government accuses them of fuelling the crisis.

13-14 January 2017

Negotiations with the teachers' unions and civil society organisations collapse amid police abuses, including the shooting and killing of two civilians in Bamenda. Anglophone leaders initiate "Operation Ghost Town" and boycott schools in Northwest and Southwest regions.

17 January 2017

Civil society leaders are arrested, but school closures continue and protests intensify. The government shuts down access to the Internet for 92 days.

23 January 2017

President Biya creates a National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism as part of a response to address grievances. Anglophone militants criticise the initiative as too little, too late.

2 August 2017

Crisis Group publishes a report on the root causes of the crisis, warns about the risk of violence and calls on the Cameroonian government to initiate a dialogue on decentralisation, federalism and governance reforms.

12-17 September 2017

Three homemade bombs explode in Bamenda, with no human casualties. Over the following three weeks, security forces kill at least 40 people during the brutal suppression of large protests across major towns and villages in Northwest and Southwest provinces.

19 October 2017

Crisis Group publishes a briefing warning of an imminent insurgency in Anglophone regions and calls on President Biya to adopt de-escalating measures and initiate a dialogue on decentralisation and federalism.

1 December 2017

After Anglophone separatists begin carrying out armed attacks in November, killing at least eight members of the security forces, and after four bombs explode in Bamenda, President Biya declares war against the Anglophone separatists.

21 December 2017

Crisis Group publishes a statement warning that separatist militias are rapidly growing and calling on President Biya to urgently initiate a genuine effort at dialogue on reforms.

11 February 2018

Alongside continued killings of security forces members, separatist militias start kidnapping Cameroonian officials and foreign nationals.

26 April 2018

Crisis Group publishes a briefing emphasising the importance of the Catholic Church's role in mediating between Anglophone separatists and the state to stem a dangerous and growing crisis.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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