



Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: Recent Developments and Issues for Congress

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Tensions have grown in western Cameroon since the government's suppression of a protest movement led by members of the country's minority Anglophone community in late 2016. In 2017, the situation escalated as one Anglophone faction symbolically declared the secession of the region and some Anglophone groups took up arms. While granting minor concessions, the government has arrested dozens of activists and deployed the military to put down unrest. The crisis has heightened historic fissures in Cameroon's diverse society and adds to the country's political and security challenges. (See CRS In Focus IF10279, *Cameroon*.) Multiple Members of Congress have expressed concern about human rights abuses, including reported arrests of U.S. citizens and residents.

President Paul Biya (85), one of Africa's longest-serving leaders at nearly 36 years in office, is widely expected to run for another 7-year term in elections slated for October 2018. Biya has no clear successor, spurring concerns about a potential political crisis should he die or become incapacitated in office. National Assembly elections are also expected before year's end. Biya's party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, won 63 out of 70 Senate seats in indirect elections in March 2018 (the remaining 30 Senators are appointed by the President) and holds a majority in the Assembly. The ruling party has Anglophone members, notably including Prime Minister Philemon Yang, in office since 2009.

Prior to the expansion of the Boko Haram conflict from northeast Nigeria into the surrounding Lake Chad Basin—which includes Cameroon—in 2014-2015, U.S. policy toward Cameroon was “focused ... on finding ways to influence the Cameroonian Government to adopt political reforms,” as the then-Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs testified in 2012. Since then, U.S. engagement has come to emphasize counterterrorism partnership. Cameroon participates in the donor-backed Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram and hosts about 300 U.S. military personnel supporting regional counterterrorism operations. Historically a minor recipient of U.S. security assistance, Cameroon has become a significant beneficiary within Africa, with funding administered by the Departments of

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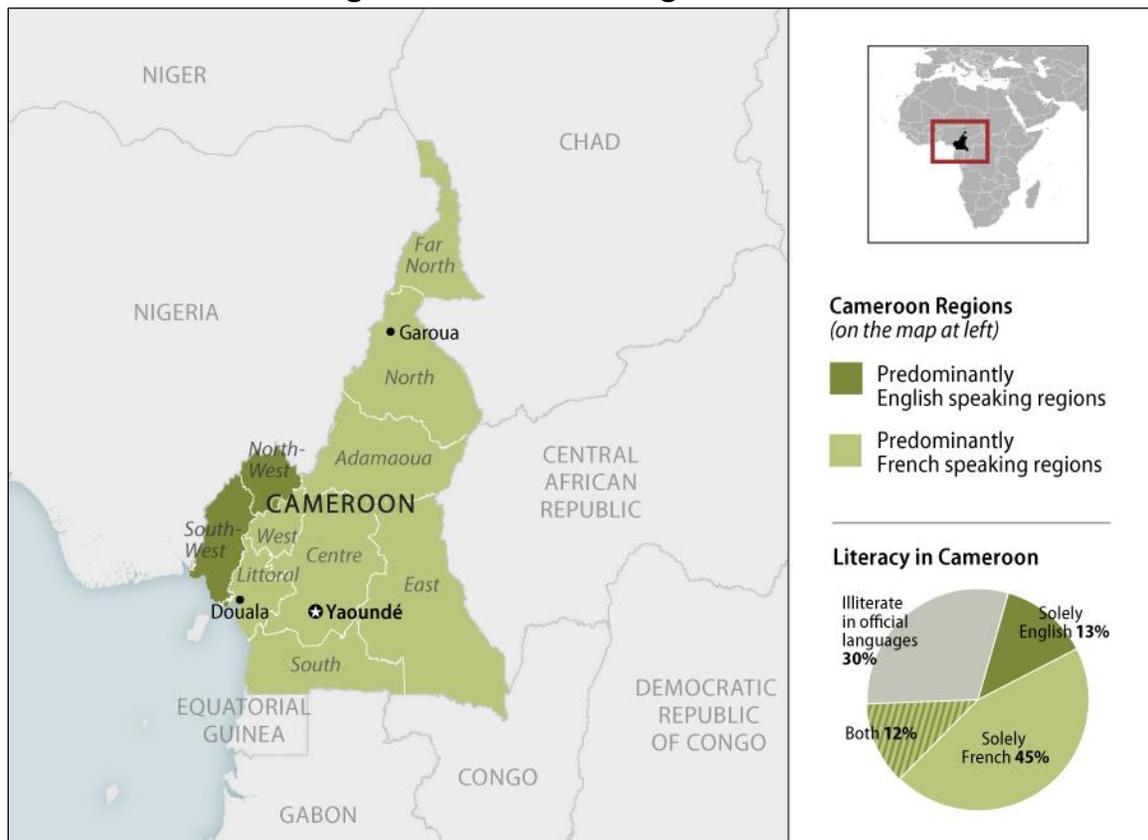
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State and Defense.

Figure I. Cameroon's Linguistic Divide



Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map and information generated by (name redacted) using data from the Department of State (2015); Esri (2016); ArcWorld (2016); and DeLorme (2016). Literacy data from Cameroon's Central Bureau of the Census and Population Studies, 2005.

Key Developments Since 2016

Protests and strikes erupted in western cities in October 2016 over the central government's reported efforts to hire French speakers in schools and courts in Anglophone-majority regions. Negotiations between government officials and protest leaders collapsed in January 2017 amid rioting. The government then banned prominent Anglophone groups involved in the talks, brought terrorism charges against top activists, cut internet access in Anglophone regions, and sought to suppress critical media commentary. President Biya later offered concessions, restoring internet access, releasing some protest leaders, creating a National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, and appointing more Anglophone magistrates. Anglophone activists have portrayed these actions as largely symbolic and decried an ongoing government crackdown.

Anglophone protests again erupted on October 1, 2017, the anniversary of the unification of French- and English-speaking areas in 1961 (see below). Some proclaimed the independence of the Federal Republic of Ambazonia—a reference to a bay that once marked the boundary between French- and British-held areas. Security forces reportedly responded by killing at least 20 protestors and arresting over 500. Officials also restricted public gatherings and travel within affected areas. Armed separatist groups emerged around the same time and attacked state security forces. As violence escalated in early 2018, Cameroonian soldiers reportedly besieged villages, opened fire on civilians, and burned down homes. In

January 2018, Nigerian authorities forcibly returned 47 Anglophone activists, including reported asylum seekers, to Cameroon, where they have been detained as “terrorists.” In apparent retaliation, suspected Anglophone militants have reportedly seized at least 40 civilian and government hostages. The U.N. has registered over 20,000 refugees fleeing western Cameroon for Nigeria.

Background

France and the United Kingdom each colonized parts of Cameroon. French Cameroon became independent in 1960 and was joined in a federation by part of British Cameroons in 1961 following a U.N.-supervised referendum. In 1972, a unitary republic replaced the federal system. Both English and French are official languages and a dual justice system permits Anglophone and Francophone regions to follow different legal codes. Anglophones have long complained of underrepresentation in government and unequal access to public goods and services; fringe groups have periodically called for secession of “Southern Cameroons,” a British colonial-era term referring to current-day Anglophone areas. The Social Democratic Front (SDF), the largest opposition party, has its stronghold in Anglophone regions and has advocated a return to federalism, which the government rejects.

Anglophone unrest adds to a broader context of domestic and regional strains. In the north, the Boko Haram conflict has caused a humanitarian crisis. In addition to 241,000 internally displaced persons, Cameroon hosts some 88,000 Nigerian refugees fleeing Boko Haram and 249,000 fleeing conflict in the Central African Republic.

Issues for Congress

Amid uncertainty surrounding President Biya’s future tenure, the crackdown in Anglophone areas has added to concerns about Cameroon’s stability and the behavior of its security forces. Such issues are of interest to Congress given recent U.S. counterterrorism investments in Cameroon, as well as long-standing concerns about human rights, democracy, and stability in Africa. Notably, Cameroon’s military campaign in Anglophone areas comes on the heels of reports by Amnesty International in 2016 and 2017 alleging torture and killings by elements of Cameroon’s elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), a recipient of U.S. counterterrorism support. Some BIR units have reportedly deployed to Anglophone areas.

Legislative authorization and appropriation of funds for foreign aid and security cooperation are potential vehicles for congressional responses to developments in Cameroon, along with oversight activities. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018 (P.L. 115-141) directs funds to promote democracy and strengthen accountability—“including within the security forces”—in the Lake Chad Basin. H.Res. 718 would condemn the Cameroonian government’s actions against Anglophones, including the temporary detention of a U.S.-based Cameroonian-American professor in late 2017.

***Acknowledgment:** Foreign Affairs Intern Katia Cavigelli contributed to this Insight.*

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