

Upheavals in Anglophone Cameroon: updates on the situation as of 10.01.2018

1. Introduction

This report gives an outline of the state of affairs in Cameroon with respect to the prevailing upheavals in the two English speaking regions of the country. It is intended for information of Mission 21 people in Switzerland and Germany, who know Cameroon and may want to visit again. It clearly shows that there is so far no risk to visitors to the North West and South West Regions. To enhance understanding of the situation a small recall of the development thus far is necessary.

In October 2016, lawyers of English expression (Common Law Lawyers) staged two separate peaceful protests against what they complained was over dominance of the judiciary in the English speaking regions by French speaking magistrates and judges. Their argument was and remains that these magistrates and judges do not understand the Common Law practices that obtain here and cannot express themselves well in the English language; putting their clients at a disadvantage. These separate peaceful demonstrations were met with police and gendarmerie brutality and some were wounded and particularly in the South West Region, wigs were seized from lawyers. The response of the lawyers was clear: no attendance of court sessions unless the situation is redressed.

In November same year teachers of the English sub system of education also went on peaceful strike action by calling off classes based on argument that there is over dominance of French in the English sub system of education and poor translation of examination materials for public examinations into the civil service.

The situation escalated as other segments of the society joined in the strikes bringing in various grievances that were not originally tabled by the two professional groups. The government in response formed a commission to look into the issues and the professional groups and other stakeholders in society were grouped together in what came to be called the Consortium. The Consortium had several meetings with government delegations and till date the gains from these meetings remain contestable. While the government and some voices in the civil society (including some teachers) argue that some or even more has been done by the government than requested, others who continue in these upheavals say little or nothing has been done.

The requests of the Consortium shifted one gear up to include change in the political structure, calling for a return to the federal system of government as in 1961. See my report of December 2016. The government has that there is going to be no discussion on the form of government and continues to see the grievances as professional in nature and created the Bilingualism Commission to look into other issues concerning biases with respect to the use of English and French in the Cameroon society and Government. The Consortium was disbanded and some of its leaders arrested along side others; who are not members of these professional groups. In 2017, a presidential order discontinued the court proceedings for some of those detained and they gained their freedom. Others went into exile and from the Diaspora are continuing to engage in confrontations with the government. Presently, though difficult to weigh the different strengths, there are at least three groups of Anglophones seeking change in the governance of the country – those who would like to see a complete decentralisation of power based on the country's 1996 Constitution, Federalist who want a return to the two state federation and separatist.

Since December 2016, there have been arrests, internet shutdowns, releases of some of those arrested, ghost towns and school boycotts. All put together is causing harm to the economy of the regions and business people are moving out to other regions. There is increased presence of security people in the regions. The situation since September 2017 has changed with escalation of violence – attacks on security and gendarmes, displacement of people from their ancestral homes and a build up of refugees in neighbouring Nigeria.

2. Issues at Stake

School Reopening

The second term of the 2017/2018 academic year started on Wednesday 3rd January 2018 in the North West and South West Regions. Just as the first term was the attendance is poor especially in the rural areas. However, it should be mentioned that some parents sent their children to other regions to attend school and it will take some time for the schools in these regions to run at full capacities. Registration to write the GCE is going on.

The attainment of full resumption of schooling activities is further compounded by the burning of certain school campuses by unknown assailants.

Escalation of Violence

On the 22nd of September 2017 some Anglophones (*who advocate for the creation of a separate state – Ambazonia*) staged demonstration in New York when the President of Cameroon was to address the United Nations General Assembly. Simultaneously people of all ages made peaceful marches in Cameroon calling for the independence of Southern Cameroon (Ambazonia). During these marches, some people carried flags of the country they call Ambazonia. The police and gendarmes responded with tear gas and gun fire and many youth lost their lives.

On the 1st of October 2017, the leaders of this separatist movement declared their independence and many people went out to the streets carrying the flag of Ambazonia, the government response was high handed and many people died from gunshot wounds, others arrested and some have not been found by family members to date. The figures of those dead vary from one source to another but what is clear is that the death toll was highest for any single day since this crisis began.

Since this incident of 1st October 2017, the violence has not abated – police, gendarmes and other security operatives have been attacked by unknown gun men and assailants whom the government says are coming from out the country. Police and gendarmes have lost their lives in Jakiri, Bamenda (in the North West Region) and other towns in the South West Region especially in Manyu Division. The government has reacted to this act of violence by declaring a war on the perpetrators of violence and has increased security presence in the area. The security presence has not stopped many villagers to running away to neighbouring Nigeria claiming maltreatment at the hands of those who are there to maintain security. UNHCR estimates that more than 40'000 refugees from Cameroon are expected in the coming months.

Internet Shutdown

For the second time since this crisis started, the internet has been shutdown. The present shutdown came into effect on the 1st of October 2017. Different from the last shutdown is that the target is the social media. The social media has been used for spreading information which sometimes are not corroborated and considered by the government as inflammatory. Though internet is available for

other things, it is very slow and erratic. Hence it is possible to enjoy good internet during a visit to the region but it's not like that all the time.

International Colouring

The weekend of Saturday 6th January 2018 has brought in another dimension to the crisis in Cameroon through the arrest and detention of the leaders of the Ambazonia separatist movement in Nigeria. This action by the Nigeria has brought in other people into the picture such Nigerian lawyers and African Lawyers Association. The direct involvement of the Cameroon Government in the arrest is not certain though many people blame the government for the arrest.

Call to Dialogue

There are many voices both within and out of Cameroon calling for dialogue with the various agitating groups, but this has not really happened. The government initiated some dialogue with people in the regions through visits but it yielded no fruits. The federalists and separatist considered this move a non-starter. The call for dialogue has come from political opinion leaders and church leaders within Cameroon and from international personalities like the UN Secretary General and that of Commonwealth of Nations.

3. Conclusion

The situation in the North West and South West regions remain uncertain. There is general suspicion and fear of arrests given the number of people arrested so far. People are hardly properly informed of the circumstances of these arrests and so rumours are quickly spread.

The continuous tensions in the Mamfe area, seems not to end as more security operatives are attacked and police arrests continue. The effects of the arrest in Nigeria are not yet known if the detention drags on for long.

Despite the uncertainty, activities of our projects still continue and we still visit the projects and none of our partners have been hurt or arrested. Apart from Mission 21 visitors other projects and Missions have visitors to these regions all the time. Hopefully the measures taken by the government will help calm things and ensure security.

Togho Lumumba Mukong,
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Bamenda

10th January 2018