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By Dr. Alexander Noyes

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By Austin Swift

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Austin Swift is a Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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Background

Cameroon is a lower-middle-income country of 23 million located in Central Africa. In 2016, it had a GDP of $32 billion, with a growth rate of 4.4 percent. Cameroon shares borders with Chad, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Nigeria. The Northwest and Southwest regions, bordering Nigeria, speak English while the rest of the country speaks French. Both French and English are official languages. For years, the country was known as a semi-authoritarian but stable country in an unstable region. But recently two separate conflicts broke out in Cameroon’s Far North and in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions.

Anglophone and Far North Conflicts

Civil unrest in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon began in October 2016, when teachers and lawyers in the two regions took to the streets to demonstrate against the underrepresentation and marginalization of English speakers. The Anglophone regions make up 3 percent of the country’s land, but contain over 20 percent of the population. The government responded harshly, blocking internet access and employing an anti-terrorism law intended to be used in Cameroon’s fight against Boko Haram in the North.

When Anglophone separatists declared an independent “Federal Republic of Ambazonia” in October 2017, the government cracked down further, leading to outright conflict and fears of civil war. The government arrested thousands, and security forces fired on protestors. Biya deployed the Rapid Intervention Battalion, a feared special forces unit that reports directly to the president. According to the International Crisis Group, the conflict has led to the deaths of 420 civilians, 175 security forces, and hundreds of separatists and has displaced more than 300,000. Another 25,000 have fled to Nigeria. In the fighting, security forces have been accused of widespread human rights abuses, including executions of civilians and the burning of more than 20 villages.

Cameroon has also been fighting a battle with Boko Haram in the country’s Far North region, along the border with Nigeria, since 2012. According to the United Nations, this conflict has led to the displacement of 238,000. Just before the 2018 elections, after a decline in attacks, Biya announced that the fight against Boko Haram had been won.

2018 Elections and Aftermath

In the lead-up to the election, Anglophone separatist groups threatened to disrupt and boycott the presidential contest. Election day was marred by violence, with security forces killing two armed men in Bamenda, an English-speaking town in the Northwest. Deben Tchoffo, the governor of the Northwest region, defended the actions of the security forces: “We shall
not allow terrorists to disrupt the election. We are informed that armed men are shooting indiscriminately to frighten voters, we shall not allow such a thing to happen.” Skirmishes between security forces and separatists were also reported in six other towns, with several killed in the Southwest region. On election day, Biya said that he was “satisfied that the election is taking place in calm and serenity and without fighting.” More than 7,000 election observers, mostly from the region, were in Cameroon for the polls. The African Union and the African Network for the Promotion of Democracy and Good Governance both said that elections were generally fair. But turnout was low, particularly in the English-speaking regions.

The day after the election, Kamto surprised many by announcing that he had won the vote (but did not furnish any evidence to back up the claim) and called on Biya to step down: “I call on President Paul Biya to ensure a peaceful transition and avoid situations that may be ugly for Cameroon.” He added: “I have received a clear mandate from the Cameroonian people . . . I want the national and international community to bear witness to this historic event that has ushered in a democratic political change in our country.” Hundreds of his youth supporters marched on the streets of Yaounde, the capital. The ruling CPDM reacted by calling this premature declaration “seditious.” Jean Nkouete, the CPDM Secretary-General, proclaimed that Kamto was aiming to “cause an uprising of the population to defend an imaginary victory, create an atmosphere of tension, insecurity and violence.” He urged calm: “We ask all our compatriots to remain peaceful as we await the proclamation results of the election by the Constitutional Council within 15 days as provided for by the electoral code.”

Conclusion

Due to an uneven playing field, the power of incumbency, the loyalty of the security services, and a divided opposition, Cameroon watchers widely expect Biya to prevail and win a seventh term when the official results are announced. In the country’s last election, in 2011, Biya officially won 77 percent of the vote. But the security situation remains precarious, and the early victory announcement by Kamto could lead to a drawn-out disputed election. With tensions already high and Kamto’s supporters taking to the streets, further election-related violence seems likely. International actors may need to encourage Biya to show restraint and urge all candidates to abide by the country’s laws. Regardless of who prevails, outside actors should support all efforts to find a lasting solution to the Anglophone crisis. The Anglophone General Conference, organized by a group of religious leaders and currently scheduled for November 21–22, could present such an opportunity.

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In the remote interior of Equatorial Guinea, Djibloho, a new capital city, is rising from the rainforest. Also called Ciudad de la Paz (City of Peace), the emerging metropolis of Djibloho is already being used for state functions, and it will eventually replace the current island capital, Malabo, as the centralized seat of power. Concerns have arisen about the political motives and environmental costs of building a capital from scratch.

From Malabo to Djibloho

Equatorial Guinea comprises a mainland region and several islands in the Bight of Bonny. The current capital city of Malabo is located on the island of Bioko. Geographically isolated, Malabo is closer to Cameroon than to mainland Equatorial Guinea. On the mainland, the city of Bata is the largest port and population center. In 2017, the population of Equatorial Guinea was roughly 1.27 million, with roughly 726,000 living on the mainland. The new capital is being touted as the “city of the future” complete with a six-lane highway, luxury hotel, 18-hole golf course, presidential palace, and a Formula 1 racetrack. It will also host the newly minted International University of Central Africa. When the capital is completed, more than 200,000 people are expected to live there. The construction has led to an international debate between those arguing for the need for development in Central Africa and those arguing for environmental protection. In an effort to highlight the environmental impact of building a capital in the remote interior, Global Forest Watch has mapped tree cover loss in Equatorial Guinea from 2001 to 2017. During that period, the country lost 100,000 hectares of forest (approximately 247,000 acres; this total does not include any tree cover gained).

Kingdom of Oil

A former Spanish colony, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea gained independence in 1968. In 1979, a military coup d’état led by Teodoro Obiang Nguema toppled the regime of his uncle, dictator Francisco Macías Nguema. After the discovery of vast oil reserves in the early 1990s, the country became Africa’s third largest producer of oil behind Nigeria and Angola. As cash flooded the country, the regime instituted a one-party state. Obiang and his 42 acknowledged children preside over one of the world’s most repressive systems. Often winning over 95 percent of the vote, Obiang has ruled for almost four decades and currently holds the title of Africa’s longest serving ruler. International watchdogs point to the disparity between members of the regime, who are reported to spend lavishly outside the country, and average citizens, who subsist on less than $2 per day. Infrastructure spending accounts for 80 percent of annual governmental expenditures, with health care and education accounting for less than 3 percent.

In 2004, a failed coup against Obiang (the Wonga Coup) exposed the strategic vulnerability of the isolated island capital to internal and external threats, and President Obiang decided to relocate the capital to seek a geopolitical refuge in the rainforest. In an interview with the BBC Obiang confirmed his strategic rationale for relocating the capital to the remote interior: “We need a secure place for my government and for future governments. That’s why we have created Oyala [also known as Djibloho], to guarantee the government of Equatorial Guinea.” The location of Djibloho deep in the jungle provides increased geographic security, which Obiang hopes will act as a deterrent to potential coup plotters.
African Capitals on the Move

Equatorial Guinea is far from alone in moving its national capital. Several other African governments have opted to build capitals from scratch. Tanzania began the process of moving its administrative capital over four decades ago, yet the government has only recently completed the transition from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma. In 1983, the capital of Côte d’Ivoire was relocated to Yamoussoukro, the hometown of the president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. In 1991, the government of Nigeria, seeking to pacify ethnic divisions and quell overpopulation, relocated its capital from Lagos to Abuja. Most recently, in 2017, the government of Zambia announced its intention to replace Lusaka and relocate the capital to a more centralized location. While some of these decisions were made in the name of national development, Obiang’s appears to be motivated principally to preserve his power.

Conclusion

The planned relocation of Equatorial Guinea’s capital may improve security for the regime, but the environmental costs may well prove high. The relocation will open up swaths of rainforest to urbanization and resource extraction, which in turn could pose ecological threats. Because the Obiang regime lacks transparency, it is likely that the scale of environmental impact will not be publicly documented.

Austin Swift is a Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.