CAMEROON: ANGLOPHONE PROTESTS HIGHLIGHT HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES

By Sarah Graveline

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By Alexander Noyes

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Understanding the Roots of the Crisis

The current crisis reflects a longstanding divide between Cameroon’s majority French-speaking population and its Anglophone minority, which comprises 20 percent of the population. This divide resulted from colonial policies. Following Germany’s defeat in WWI, Britain and France partitioned Germany’s colonial territory, attaching southern and northern Cameroon to Britain’s Eastern Province of Nigeria, while the rest of Cameroon came under French control. In 1961, as Britain withdrew from West Africa, southern Cameroon voted to rejoin Cameroon as part of a newly independent federated government.

Since 1961, Cameroon’s Anglophone and Francophone regions have disagreed over the role of the central government. Although Anglophone politicians pushed for semi-autonomous governance under the federated system, Cameroon’s ruling party successfully moved the country toward increasingly centralized rule under French-majority control. In May 1972, Cameroon became a unitary government, which further weakened Cameroon’s Anglophone region by removing its semiautonomous status.

The 1972 constitution protects Cameroon’s bilingual and bi-jural status; its Southwest and Northwest regions adhere to English common law, while other regions follow French civil law. Despite constitutional guarantees, however, English speakers have long argued that the central government discriminates against them. Since the 1990s, Anglophone political parties have pushed for a return to federated government or outright independence.

Current Protests: Old Grievances, New Tactics

The current crisis began in October 2016, when lawyers and teachers went on strike to protest the placement of French-speaking lawyers in common law courts and French-speaking teachers in Anglophone schools. By December, protests had spread from Bamenda, the largest Anglophone city in the Northwest region, to Buea, capital of the Southwest region. As commenters have noted, because political cooperation between the regions is historically rare, the connected protests put increased pressure on the central government.

The current protests are also taking place in a time of increased government repression. An anti-terrorism law, created in December 2014 in response to the threat from Boko Haram, has been used to stop political parties from meeting and to jail Anglophone activists.

On January 17, 2017, three activists who organized the protests were arrested under this law and are currently being tried in a military tribunal, where they face the death penalty. While civil society groups have protested the activists’ arrest, in a speech, President Paul Biya maintained the prosecution is “necessary.”

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More intrusively, on January 16, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications issued a statement notifying social media users that their posts risked criminal prosecution. Some protesters reported receiving threatening text messages from the government. The following day, at the direction of the central government, internet providers shut off service in Anglophone regions. Currently, the internet remains blocked, despite criticism from the UN and civil society organizations.

Standoff Has Larger Economic and Political Concerns

The continued standoff between protesters and the government carries economic and political costs. The internet ban is disrupting business and communication. Civil servants have not been paid, banks’ online systems are not working, and ATMs are reportedly closed. The organization Internet sans frontières, estimated that the first 15 days of the internet shutdown cost the country $723,000 in lost revenue.

The protests also pose a political risk to President Biya, who will likely run for a fifth term in 2018. The government’s reaction to protests has drawn further attention to Anglophone grievances. Activists using the Twitter hashtag #BringBackOurInternet have generated global interest in the crisis by linking it to larger issues of internet freedom. While international attention is unlikely to translate to an electoral threat to Biya, who has been in power since 1984, backlash against continued government repression may help strengthen the opposition.

Conclusion

Although Anglophone political dissent is not new, the scale of the current protests, coupled with the severity of the government response, has created a situation that is proving difficult to resolve. Central government efforts to repress dissent have so far failed, helping fuel domestic protest and generating international censure.

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Background

Located in West Africa, The Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa. It has a population of around 2 million and is entirely surrounded by Senegal. As highlighted in the December 8, 2016, edition of Africa Watch, Jammeh came to power via a military coup in 1994. His 22 years in power, which pushed the country in an authoritarian direction, were marked by successive coup attempts, restrictions on democratic expression, and human rights violations. In 2011, Jammeh declared that he would rule for “a billion years,” and in 2015 he announced that the country would become an Islamic republic. In 2016, Jammeh promised to pull out of the International Criminal Court. Jammeh's increasingly impulsive and authoritarian rule left The Gambia isolated.

Leadership Crisis

In The Gambia's 2016 elections, a united coalition of opposition parties, led by Barrow, surprised many by capturing 45 percent of the vote, with Jammeh taking only 36 percent. After reneging on his agreement to concede defeat, Jammeh declared a state of emergency and unilaterally extended his rule for another three months, but faced concerted domestic, regional, and international pressure to hand over the reins of power. ECOWAS quickly launched a high-level mediation effort aimed at convincing Jammeh to step down. The effort was supported by a wide array of international actors, including the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States. Compounding this outside pressure, many of Jammeh's top domestic allies began to abandon him—half of his government resigned, including his vice-president since 1997, Isatou Njie-Saidy.

ECOWAS Intervention

Fearing for his life, Barrow fled to Senegal in mid-January, where he was sworn into office at the Gambian embassy on January 19. Amid news of a looming regional military intervention, up to 45,000 refugees also flowed across the border to Senegal. Although the military appeared to back Jammeh for much of December and January, on the eve of the ECOWAS intervention, The Gambia's army chief General Ousman Badjie pledged his allegiance to the freshly inaugurated Barrow: “We are going to welcome them [the ECOWAS force] with flowers and make them a cup of tea.” The ECOWAS force was composed of troops mostly from Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, and Ghana. The Nigerian Air Force contributed 200 troops as well as aviation assets, including combat aircraft. When ECOWAS troops eventually entered The Gambia on January 19, they faced no resistance from the Gambian military.
The ECOWAS contingent stopped short of marching on the capital, Banjul, to allow for a final, and ultimately successful, mediation attempt. Under the terms of the deal, Jammeh agreed to step down but would be afforded all the rights of a former president—including immunity from prosecution unless two-thirds of the national assembly votes to override—and would be allowed to keep some of his wealth, including a fleet of luxury cars. After the deal, reports emerged that Jammeh may have emptied the state coffers before he departed, taking up to $11 million with him to Equatorial Guinea.

Conclusion

On January 26, as Barrow returned to The Gambia and was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of thousands, he announced: “The rule of fear has been banished from The Gambia for good.” While Barrow’s incoming government faces enormous challenges in reviving the economy and transitioning the country toward a functioning democracy, The Gambia’s transfer of power—and ECOWAS’s strong push to respect the election results—holds promise for the deepening of democracy in the region.

ECOWAS has a history of interventions in the name of democracy in the region, starting with the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. Indeed, in 1999, ECOWAS went so far as to proclaim its right to intervene in the region with the adoption of the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security. These norms, and the demonstrated willingness to back them up with actions as in The Gambia, stand in contrast to other African regional bodies, which have been less willing to defend electoral successes by opposition parties, as exemplified by the Southern African Development Community’s handling of Zimbabwe’s 2008 elections.

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