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By Dr. Alexander Noyes

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Soldiers trying to help people escape an armed confrontation between government forces and unknown gunmen in Mocimboa da Praia. (Source: “Gunfire continues in Mocimboa da Praia,” Club of Mozambique, October 6, 2017, <http://clubofmozambique.com/news/gunfire-continues-in-mocimboa-da-praia-aim/>.)

Dr. Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

ANGLOPHONE PROTESTS IN CAMEROON—MORE THAN LANGUAGE

By George F. Ward, Jr.

The Anglophone protest movement in the Republic of Cameroon in West Africa boiled over into violence once again in late September 2017. By October 3, the [death toll](#) had reportedly risen to 17. The Anglophone movement in Cameroon has its roots in the country’s colonial and immediate post-colonial history. Today, the concerns of the English-speaking minority, which makes up 20 percent of the population, extend beyond language to include political, economic, and ethnic factors. The Anglophone protests add to the stress on the government of Paul Biya, one of Africa’s longest-serving strongmen, which is already challenged by the Boko Haram threat in the country’s north and insecurity on the border with the Central African Republic to the east. [more...](#)



Protestors in Cameroon. (Source: Screen capture of video, “Cameroon Civil Society Urges Anglophone Regions to Continue Protests,” Africa News, January 5, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y75326tr>.)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA’s three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA’s Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Background

Mozambique is a [low-income](#) country with a population of 28 million located in southern Africa. The [population](#) is 28 percent Catholic, 18 percent Muslim, 15 percent Zionist Christian, and 12 percent Protestant, with the remainder identifying as other or as not religious. President Filipe Nyusi leads the ruling FRELIMO party (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*), while Afonso Dhlakama heads the main opposition party, RENAMO (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*). The two parties fought a decades-long civil war that ended in 1992 and left close to a [million](#) dead.

Islam in Mozambique

As reported in previous [editions](#) of *Africa Watch*, the FRELIMO and RENAMO parties have reengaged in a low-level conflict since 2013. But the emergence of Islamist violent extremism is a new dynamic in the country. Eric Morier-Genoud, a scholar at Queens Belfast University, [called](#) the October attack the “first confirmed Islamist armed attack in Mozambique.” Indeed, Mozambique has a history of relatively harmonious inter-religious relations. The majority of Muslims in Mozambique are Sufi, belonging to a variety of brotherhoods called Turuq. Only recently have have reformist [Wahhabi](#) groups, returning from universities in Saudi Arabia, gained a foothold in Mozambique. Although Mozambique has not seen violent religious conflict, most of the country’s Muslims live in the underdeveloped and isolated northern areas of the country, which, along with other historical grievances, has given rise to a sense of [marginalization](#).

Group Behind Recent Attack

The “Al-Shabaabs” group behind the October attack is believed to comprise young Mozambican Muslims who formed a sect in 2014 and have taken over [two mosques](#) in Mocimboa da Praia. The attackers [reportedly](#) spoke Swahili, Portuguese, and Kimwani, the local dialect on the Cabo Delgado coast of Mozambique. Some of the group’s members are believed to have attended schools in Saudi Arabia and Sudan. [According](#) to Fernando Neves, the mayor of Mocimboa da Praia, former members of the group hailed from Tanzania and were recently repatriated.

The group’s [demands](#) include the imposition of Sharia law, the banning of alcohol, and the removal of children from the secular state education system. According to locals, a number of events led up to the October attack, including incidents in March and April of this year in which “Al-Shabaabs” attempted to prevent community members from seeking state medical care and sending their children to state schools. The police [arrested](#) three men for these earlier incidents.

Government Response

Local Muslim leaders have been aware of the group for several years and previously informed the government of the group’s practices and ideologies. According to Sheik Ahumar Alifa, a Muslim leader in Mocimboa da Praia, those warnings went unheeded. After the October attacks, Alifa [pointed out](#): “We have always presented our concerns about these people of Al-Shabaab, who call themselves [Muslims]. . . It’s all up to the government. We have always reported what’s been going on.”



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The government appears to be taking the October attack seriously, but so far has ruled out the possibility of links to transnational Islamist extremist groups. Celmira da Silva, the governor of Cabo Delgado, [said](#) the attacks were “extremely frightening.” Despite the aforementioned ties to Tanzania, the government is currently viewing the threat as homegrown. Inacio Dina, spokesman for the police, [said](#) the attackers were from a “radical Islamic sect.” He went [on](#): “The way they operated makes us believe that there is a structure behind the group,” but “there is no evidence that they are members of Shabaab or Boko Haram. According to the information gathered, all those captured or killed are Mozambicans.”

Conclusion

The October Islamist attack in Mozambique marks a potential shift for the country. How the Mozambican government reacts moving forward will shape the extent and nature of the threat. Morier-Genoud [argues](#), “Downplaying the affair as ‘banditry’ and dealing only with the sect when it’s clear that there are broader religious and social dynamics at play risks seeing the problem reemerge elsewhere.” However, “going for an all-out repression to eradicate the ‘Islamist threat’ could radicalise other Muslims and root the problem deeper and more widely.” As noted in the October 12, 2017, [edition](#) of *Africa Watch*, the experiences of both Nigeria and Kenya provide useful cautionary tales in this regard, as both governments’ harsh responses to the threat of violent extremism proved counterproductive.

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The Anglophone Factor in Cameroon

The [Federal Republic of Cameroon](#) was born on October 1, 1961. That event marked the reunification of two territories—British and French dependencies—that were the product of the partition of the German Kamerun Protectorate after World War I. During the process of decolonization, two segments of the British territory, called Northern Cameroons and Southern Cameroons, went different ways. The smaller Northern Cameroons became part of Nigeria, while the Southern Cameroons, after a period of negotiations, adhered to the new Federal Republic of Cameroon and became known as West Cameroon.

From the outset, the Anglophone minority in West Cameroon chafed under the central government dominated by the Francophone majority. The English speakers felt that constitutional commitments to federalism were flouted in practice. The dominance of the Francophones gradually became evident in [many aspects](#) of everyday life, ranging from which side of the road to drive on (right rather than left), units of measure (meters rather than feet), and, most important, education, where elements of the French-derived *Baccalauréat* crept into the Anglophone General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination. In 1972, Cameroon's autocratic president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, orchestrated a constitutional change that transformed the federal republic into a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon.

Cameroon—A Nation Divided

Today, [Cameroon](#) consists of 10 regions, of which two, Northwest and Southwest, are Anglophone. Those two regions cover only 3 percent of the country's land area, but they include slightly more than 20 percent of the population. They are also relatively prosperous, with dynamic agricultural, commercial, and information technology sectors, and they produce most of Cameroon's oil, which accounts for one-twelfth of the country's GDP. The Anglophone area is also the stronghold of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF).

Although English speakers hold some prominent offices, such as that of prime minister, they are underrepresented in the government and administration of Cameroon. As of this year, there was only [one Anglophone](#) among 36 ministers with portfolio. Out of a total of 514 [judicial officers](#), only 15 are Anglophones. Over half the magistrates in the English-speaking Northwest region are French-speaking, with backgrounds in French-derived civil code rather than in the Common Law tradition that has applied in the English-speaking regions.

The Anglophones also feel that they have been economically disadvantaged, claiming that the central government has abandoned development projects in their regions in favor of ones in French-speaking areas.

Interestingly, [ethnic divisions](#) in Cameroon do not mirror linguistic ones. The two English-speaking regions, Northwest and Southwest, are dominated by different ethnic groups, each of which has cultural links with French speakers in adjacent regions. These divisions have been used at times by the central government leaders to divide the Anglophone leadership.

Today's Unrest—Law and Education

As reported in [Africa Watch](#) in February 2017, the chronicle of Anglophone protests and governmental responses in Cameroon is long and complicated. The current unrest, which began in October 2016, has crystallized around two sets of issues: law and education. On [October 11, 2016](#), lawyers from both English-speaking regions went on strike over the justice system's failure to use Common Law. The lawyers demanded the translation into English of key legal texts, and they criticized the "Francophonization" of the Common Law jurisdictions.

On November 8, 2016, a protest march mobilized by the lawyers turned violent. On November 21, teachers joined the strike in protest over the appointment of teachers who did not have sufficient command of English and the failure to respect the distinct character of schools and universities in the English-speaking regions. Additional protests occurred, including on campuses, and the movement expanded from the Northwest region to the Southwest. The police and army reacted with violence. From October 2016 to February 2017, at least nine people were killed and many more were wounded. In a campaign of intimidation, security forces arrested up to 150 Anglophone leaders, some of whom are being prosecuted through military tribunals.

Leaders of the protest movement responded with calls for a two-day "Operation Ghost Town," asking people to stay in their homes. The government answered with additional arrests and by shutting down the internet in the two English-speaking regions. The "Ghost Town" movement, eventually renamed "Country Sundays," continued. Boycotts of schools resulted in the shutdown of schools and universities, many of which [remain closed](#). On April 2, 2017, the government turned the internet back on after a 92-day cut, but service has been intermittently interrupted during the violence that began on October 3 of this year.

Calls for Separation as Protests Spread

Demands for independence have been on the agenda of a minority of Anglophone activists for many years, but these sentiments have recently come to the forefront. Beginning in [September 2017](#), some demonstrators have hoisted the separatist flag of their would-be nation, the Republic of Ambazonia, on public buildings and at road junctions. No group has actually declared independence, but that goal has become a central theme of protests. The Ambazonian Defense Forces, an armed wing of the protest movement, have claimed credit for a number of [improvised explosive device \(IED\) attacks](#) against government security forces and infrastructure targets. So far, the IED attacks have claimed no lives.

Conclusion

As [Africa Watch](#) pointed out on July 27, 2017, President Biya has consistently demonstrated a willingness to use force in order to hold on to power. With presidential elections looming in 2018, he can be expected to continue that pattern. Even though he will probably be able to contain the Anglophone protests, the turmoil is likely to impede economic development and could reduce Cameroon's capacity to contribute to the fight against Boko Haram and other militant groups.

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