

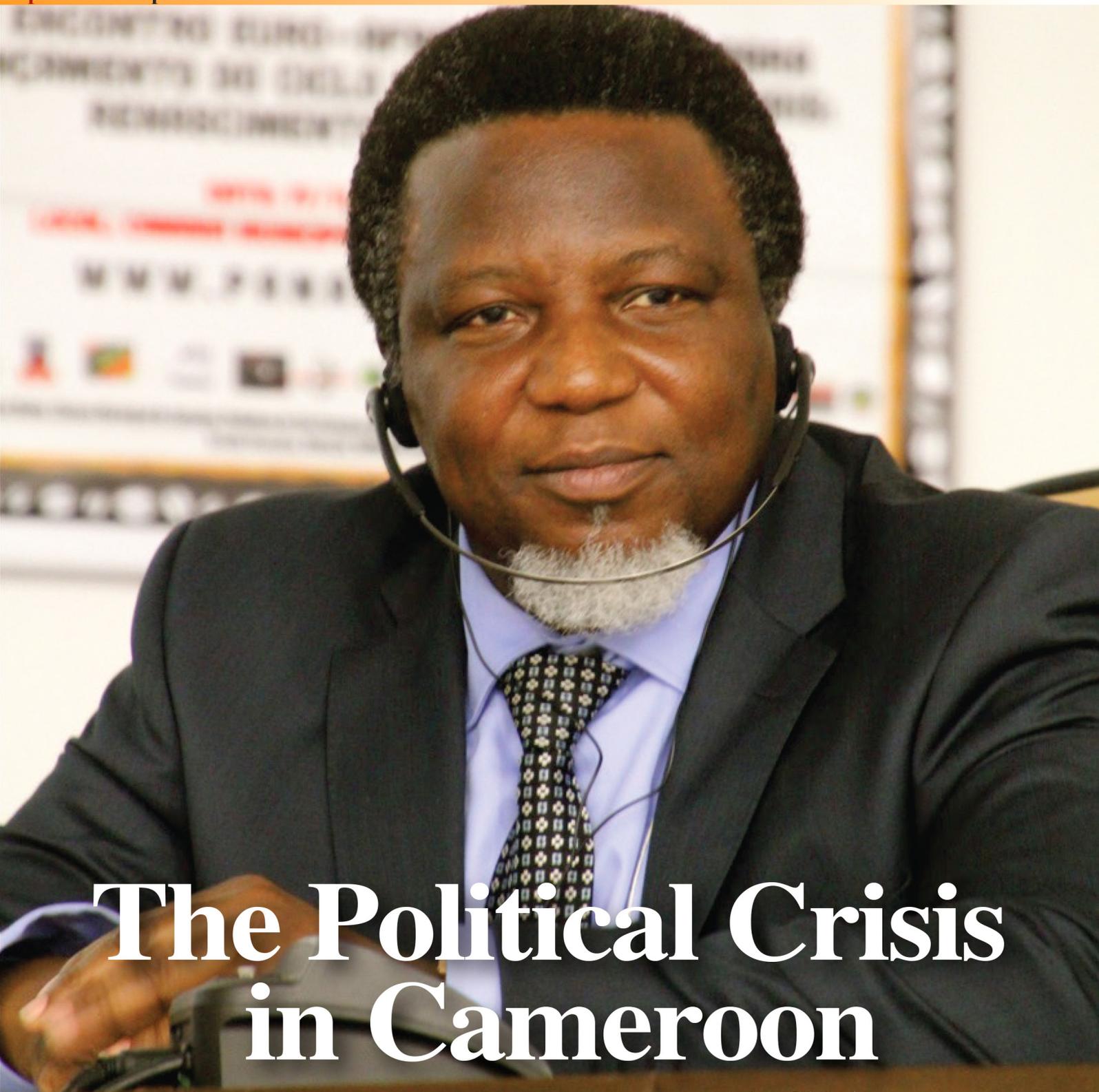
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The Political Crisis in Cameroon

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The responsibility of our time is nothing less than a revolution – a revolution that would be peaceful if we are wise enough; humane if we care enough; successful if we are fortunate enough. But a revolution will come whether we will it or not. We can affect its character; we cannot alter its inevitability.

Robert F. Kennedy

My Message To the Cameroonian in the Middle

I was in a conversation with some students about what they called the "Cameroon Anglophone Problem". I told them I had spent the last few weeks informing myself about the issues in contention and was happy to give them my sense of what they are, where things currently stand, who the key actors are, and what may be a way forward. Caught between forces that are increasingly tearing at the heart of the nation – corruption, nepotism, injustice, joblessness, falling standards in health and education, decline in job-creating investments, poor infrastructure, etc. – Cameroon now faces a crisis that is bigger

than the characters that have provoked and continue to sustain it; one that will, as it finds resolution, strengthen the nation or destroy it. The following thought-lines are to the students and to all those fellow citizens I consider the "Cameroonians in the Middle". I hope they will pause, as they read this piece, and take a deeper and more holistic view of what is at stake here, and act in ways for which history will remember and honor them.

In a country divided, the "middle" is that place between the two poles that have come to define the current struggle - those options being pursued by

the government, on the one hand, and by a loose coalition of leaders of the Anglophone cause on the other. The opposite positions have been defined on social media and other communication platforms as the "La République du Cameroun" option and the "Independence/Restoration" option, respectively. I have looked closely at the arguments and the logic behind the two, and I believe there is a middle ground that deserves attention, if for no other reason than the fact that there are millions of Cameroonians who currently stand there and who need clarity on what is happening and what may be the way forward

Part I:

What is driving the Crisis in Cameroon? When Nostalgia and Visions of the Future Collide!

The Independence/Restoration option is an idea that is possibly as old as the 1961 union of the Cameroon nation. It had many proponents at the start of the new decade in 1960, especially among those in the then English-speaking Southern Cameroons - a United Nations Trust Territory - who doubted the wisdom of a union with the French-speaking La République du Cameroun. For them, it was not argument enough to say that the union would restore a fissure that pre-dated European colonization. The UN ultimately held a plebiscite and the outcome was for a union that came to be known as the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Those who had opposed this came into the new post-plebiscite arrangement kicking and screaming but were cautiously willing to give this historic experiment a chance. Their suspicions of the union would re-emerge every time tensions rose in the country, as was the case in 1966 (dissolution of all

political parties), 1972 (annulation of the 1961 unification accords) and to a higher degree in 1990 (Tripartite Conference and return to a multiparty state). They re-emerged again in 2016 and this time, they seem to be gaining in momentum within the national and Diaspora anglophone community for reasons that are important to analyze and understand.

The Independence/Restoration arguments are based on a singular and powerful premise: the union experiment has failed, having brought to citizens in the anglophone parts of the country nothing but misery, political marginalization, economic deprivation, slow cultural annihilation, weakened educational systems, and the forced expatriation of the best anglophone minds to countries around the world. The proponents point to the loss of everything of value inherited from the colonial experience: a

corruption-free civil service and commissions of inquiry to guarantee it; an educational system that was built on meritocracy; a judiciary that recognized the fact that none was above the law and all were equal before the law; a reformatory prisons system that sought to rehabilitate prisoners; structured and expanding public services provided by a cadre of education inspectors, sanitary inspectors, vehicle inspection police, and the Public Works Department. They point with considerable nostalgia to profit-making and generally profitable para-public institutions that included the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), Powercam, Cameroon Bank, the Produce Marketing Board, the Cameroon Air Transport Corporation, etc., and to how these got consumed and destroyed by their counterparts in French-speaking Cameroon. They also remember a period when businessmen and women,

not public servants, were the creators of wealth and constituted the nation's most successful entrepreneurs.

Nostalgia-induced passions and the hope of a return to that future constitute the most powerful drivers of the emotionally-charged desire for

an independent Southern Cameroons. A growing number of anglophones, disillusioned by what is going on in the country at this time, seeing evidence of the failure of leadership and governance everywhere they look, are turning to a new and younger class of leaders - what remains

of the Consortium and the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) along with its various affiliate groups (both of them banned in Cameroon), the Ambazonia separatists, and the Movement for the Restoration and Independence of Southern Cameroons - for hope, leadership and guidance.

Part II: What Underscores the Government's Response?

Standing in opposition to the de facto anglophone leadership are the government proponents of a counter narrative that finds moral justification in what they consider the Price of Peace. It is a response by the national leadership to a crisis that started with English-speaking lawyers demanding to be allowed to argue cases before judges who spoke English. The crisis soon morphed into one that involved teachers and students, and a population that started evaluating what they increasingly perceived as attempts to assimilate them, nullify their culture and phase out use of the language they

spoke. The government's response evolved over time.

At the start of the crisis in the last months of 2016 - brought on, as noted, by lawyers who wanted to see a return to Common Law in the English-speaking regions of the country and by teachers and students who were opposed to having a rising tide of non-English speaking teachers in their part of Cameroon - the government, believing that this would be a passing phenomenon, opted for a response that was, at first, intended to "send a message". The forces of law and order

were sent in to rid the streets of vocal but peaceful demonstrators and to silence their cries for systemic improvements in education and the fair application of justice in the anglophone regions. A few deaths, rapes, beatings and property destruction later, the decision was made to change tact, especially after the anglophones adopted the mantra of non-violence and called for a school boycott and stay-at-home strike! Believing that the problem was essentially coming from some "hungry people", the government conjectured that what it will take is to "fill a few pockets".

Rumored attempts to bribe leaders failed and the strike continued. If a brutal response and money could not buy compliance, Yaounde felt it was time to negotiate with the leadership of the teachers and lawyers who had come together in what became the Consortium of Cameroon Civil Society leaders. A credible government source insists on the fact that the negotiations were held with Union leaders, not the Consortium.

People close to the Civil Society negotiators spoke of evidence of bad faith on the part of those sent to the regions from the nation's capital to hold talks. It was felt that they were, for the most part, not empowered to give away anything in the negotiations which, by their

very nature, should constitute a give-and-take. The negotiations did not seem to be going anywhere and, after an embarrassing failure to achieve the most important objective it sought - the return to school by teachers and students - the government undertook a complete reversal in approach. The quiet word in many circles was that the regime hardliners had won. Literally overnight, the Consortium negotiators were declared terrorists and some of their leaders immediately arrested; others ran into exile and have continued the "struggle" from hideouts in the Diaspora.

It has been widely intimated that the hardliners in government effectively silenced the moderate majority who

believe, as possibly do many in the country, that this should have been seen as an opportunity for the government to finally generate a genuine conversation on what it means to be Cameroonian. The so-called moderates were constantly undercut by the few who are believed to benefit the most from a heavily centralized presidential system. These hardliners include the handful of people with the most access to a leader who has been described as the "absentee landlord". It is believed that they reflect the innermost thoughts of their leader and they, like the President, are counting on time – that central element in the Biya system of governance – to resolve the problem.

Part III: Strategies of Failure

The current strategies of the opposing parties are strengthening the divide within the country, giving credence to a poetic line from Irish Poet, William B. Yeats: "turning and turning in a widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer; things fall apart, the center cannot hold...". The words

that follow in that poem – "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" – hopefully constitute no more than a very distant prospect in Cameroon.

Is the government in Yaounde succeeding in its strategy? Not from my perspective! It is a

strategy that wants to strengthen the argument for secession in order to fight it; a war strategy! Time will only expose the wounds and deepen the sense of abandonment of a segment of the population that has put forth some legitimate grievances. Shutting down the internet in their part of

the country will remind anglophones, everyday, that they are a disposable community within the nation. The connectivity issue finally made it into the political debate in France and, as a result, may soon find resolution! Merci la France? The over night arrest of the leaders of the Consortium after a presidential decree that declared them terrorists only hours after they sat at the same table of negotiation with senior government officials will remain a stark reminder of the very personalized regime that governs the republic. The subliminal messages that seek to link the anglophone action to economic calculations that is, to deny La République du Cameroun the revenue from Southern Cameroons' enormous natural resources are generally false and counterproductive. If the core of this crisis has shifted from the initial demand for de-centralizing

power and responding to regional specificities to a rising desire for independence, it is simply because the government has made the devolution of power a non-negotiable issue. That is what is at the heart of the crisis. That is why many, at the start of the problem, spoke of the need to immediately apply a 1996 constitution that emphasized the empowerment of local jurisdictions in the country. It is certainly why that constitution was never fully applied in the first place.

Is an independent Southern Cameroons nation an attainable future prospect? The response to this will give the lie to the strategy adopted by those who profess Independence and Restoration. There is little evidence of a coordinated approach to achieving the independence that seems to be the common goal of the disparate organizations

working for it. Their very passionate rhetoric and online declarations are void of the magic of revolution and are not exactly matched by a coherent, strategic and well-thought through plan for achieving the articulated goals. Independence will come at a heavy cost to all who seek it but it is clear from my own investigations that the cost factor has not been identified as an important hurdle that must be credibly dealt with and overcome on the road to statehood. And if it has, as many leaders claim, none of the movements can convincingly demonstrate how they will pay the price of independence. It is a strategy based on a dangerous, maybe deadly, illusion. Low tolerance for contradiction and a simmering fight for leadership remains a little acknowledged but constant threat to a necessary unified front if ever there will be a rendez-vous with their desired destiny.

Part IV:

A Personal View – A union strengthened or a dream deferred.

The current crisis, by the look of things, has entered its "Ostrich War" phase. Pitted against each other are, on the one hand, a

government that has been captured by profiteering hardliners (supported by the same external but invisible force

that has pulled the strings since the start of independence in a 1960) and, on the other, an increasingly determined and

growing number of take-no-prisoners "Southern" Cameroonians. I believe the final outcome of this mini version of the Cold War will determine the future of Cameroon in the most unsuspecting of ways. And it is here, I must argue, that the "Cameroonians in the Middle" must step up to the plate and demand to be heard. They must emerge and be part of a necessary national conversation that will redefine the concept of nationhood as it applies to the republic today, and recast the values that should govern a nation in which justice, fairness, equality, individual rights and basic freedoms are not vain concepts. The youth in the country desire this dialogue but may be resigned to the fact that ours is a youthful nation that is essentially youth unfriendly!

A good place to start the conversation will be by listening to the words of that insightful, young revolutionary, singer/songwriter, Valsero, in his most recent release, "Bamenda". And I suggest we

factor in the famous words of Robert Kennedy, uttered in crisis-torn South Africa in 1966: "Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest of walls of oppression and resistance." Armed with these and the courage of patriotic peacemakers, every Cameroonian in the Middle must stand in opposition to all that is contrary to our most cherished values of caring, sharing, justice and national solidarity. We must oppose the extremes in the current argument!

I believe the government in Yaounde knows what I know: that for a growing number of citizens (anglophones and francophones), the dream of a future in a state that guarantees the proximity of government to the governed is taking root. There is urgency to

addressing this crisis with honesty and forthrightness! It is the only way the lines of division can be narrowed between those who have taken sides; who believe the dream will only be realized in a two-nation divide or in a single nation built on privilege and lies. For a growing number of anglophones most especially, Cameroon will never be the same again, now or into the future, and they are convinced that no action taken by the government will kill the dream. The fact is, Yaounde still has it in its hands to determine where this all ends up and whether the outcome will be a union strengthened or a dream deferred. Peace, equality, justice, human rights and freedoms, opportunity, access to jobs - these are all very powerful and emotionally-charged notions that no government can quash. They have caught the imagination of citizens in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and possibly in many other parts of the country. Is there anything wrong in making this dream a reality for all in one Cameroon?

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