



A Second Look at Cameroon's Anglophone Special Status

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What's new? In 2019, amid fighting with separatist militants in its two Anglophone regions, the North West and South West, Cameroon granted those areas a Special Status to respond to demands for greater autonomy. This step has failed to quiet the six-year conflict, however, as clashes between government and rebel forces continue.

Why does it matter? The military campaign to quash separatist militias in Cameroon's Anglophone regions has achieved limited results. Amid continued fighting, a Canadian-led peace initiative encountered obstacles in early 2023, with the parties now silent about where talks stand. Exploration of Special Status reforms could help the conflict parties find a political solution.

What should be done? Should talks gain traction, the government should discuss prospects for robust reform of the Special Status with separatists. Possible changes include introducing statutory joint sessions for the Anglophone regional assemblies and direct universal suffrage for their election. The assemblies should receive increased autonomy and funding.

I. Overview

In 2019, as a separatist revolt raged in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions, the government granted the North West and South West a Special Status. Though a potentially significant legal and policy change, the move failed to mollify Anglophone separatists or quiet their conflict with the national government. These unsatisfying results reflect the government's failure to adequately consult Anglophone leaders in advance, but also the reality that little has changed on the ground. Though the Special Status notionally gives the Anglophone regions increased autonomy by creating regional assemblies with greater powers than Francophone regional councils, the assemblies remain weak and under the thumb of governors appointed in the capital Yaoundé. They show little inclination to serve as a platform for discussing the educational, judicial and linguistic issues that go to the heart of Anglophone identity. Reforming the Special Status to address its shortcomings could, if done in robust negotiation with the Anglophone community, help enhance Anglophone autonomy and build momentum for a broader peace deal.

Six years of conflict have killed over 6,000 in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions and displaced hundreds of thousands. Armed separatists continue to ambush security

forces and harass aid workers in their fight to secede from the majority-Francophone country. Efforts to facilitate a peace settlement between the warring parties have ebbed and flowed without gaining significant traction. Most recently, a Canadian-led effort appeared to hit a hurdle when the government issued a statement rejecting the idea of foreign facilitation to arrange talks with the separatists. Since then, the parties have been publicly mum about the status of any talks.

Cameroon's Anglophone conflict has deep roots. Its immediate history traces to 2016, when the government cracked down on Anglophone protesters who were demanding protections for the regions' educational and judicial systems. But tensions between the Anglophone regions and the majority-Francophone central government go back decades. Today's Cameroon is an amalgam of territories that were controlled by the French and British during the colonial era. In the years right after Cameroon's independence in 1961, a federal structure helped preserve a sense of autonomy in the Anglophone regions, but that arrangement did not last. Instead, the central government reconfigured the state to consolidate power in Yaoundé.

The moves toward centralisation played poorly in the Anglophone regions, where people feared assimilation into the majority-French system, and in the 1990s Yaoundé started using promises of decentralisation to soothe Anglophone anxieties. The Special Status, rooted in a provision of the 1996 constitution allowing for more power to be allocated to some regions, is part of this trend. The 1996 innovation lay dormant until 2019, when the government gave it new life by enacting a law that transformed the "regional councils" in the two Anglophone regions into more powerful "regional assemblies". This transformation is at the core of the Special Status that the North West and South West regions now enjoy.

Although arguably a step in the right direction, the rollout of the Special Status got a chilly reception in the Anglophone community and met with outright hostility from separatists. It did not help that the government pushed its changes through without consulting Anglophone leaders and separatist activists. Yaoundé also undercut the impact and legitimacy of the 2019 measures by filling the assemblies with government proxies and giving veto power over their decisions to the centrally appointed governors. In part because of the way delegates are selected, the assemblies are not representative of their constituents, with women in particular under-represented.

But that does not mean the Special Status is unsalvageable. It still represents a potentially useful step toward recognising that the North West and South West regions should fall under a differentiated jurisdiction and could – if appropriately reformed – create a framework for devolving select powers to the regions. Any changes should be the product of meaningful consultations with both Anglophone political elites and the broader public; strengthen the assemblies' capacity to work together on core issues relating to Anglophone identity; and include the institution of universal direct suffrage as a mechanism for electing more representative members to the assemblies. Reforms should also create a new position in the regional executive that focuses on addressing gender-differentiated concerns among constituents and one in the Public Conciliator's office that can assist in addressing grievances against the national military.

Reaching agreement on a reformed Special Status would not be easy. Nor, by itself, would it be sufficient to cement a peace deal in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict. Still, it would be a useful topic to explore if and when talks reach an appropriate stage. Promoting a higher level of autonomy for the Anglophone regions could help address

grievances and ease tensions that have fuelled the conflict. It is likely to be key to any successful settlement. It would thus be a good move in its own right, while also representing a possible area of compromise between the parties. In the best case, taking a second look at the Anglophone regions' Special Status might even lend momentum to talks about bringing this conflict to a long overdue end. After six years of conflict, that is a proposition well worth testing.

II. Centralisation and its Discontents

A. *Roots of Disaffection*

After six years, and with more than 6,000 dead, Cameroon's Anglophone conflict is at a stalemate. The government's military campaign in the North West and South West, as well as the separatists' determination to fight on regardless of the cost, has displaced hundreds of thousands and deprived nearly 600,000 children of education. Non-governmental organisations say the humanitarian situation in the two regions is dire, with the conflict parties often targeting aid workers. About 2.2 million people urgently need aid. Attempts to resolve the crisis have made little progress, often falling apart in early stages. The government did not participate in a Swiss-facilitated initiative launched in 2019, leaving separatist groups that had come to the table to wait in vain for it to join them. It then launched its own dialogue in October of the same year in Yaoundé, despite the non-participation of separatist leaders. In January 2023, after months of discreet talks with Ottawa and prominent separatist groups, Yaoundé eventually decided not to join a new Canada-led facilitation initiative, which is now in limbo.

In the most immediate sense, Cameroon's Anglophone crisis dates back to 2016.¹ That October, the Francophone-dominated national government seated in Yaoundé quashed peaceful protests and strikes calling for protection of English-language educational and judicial systems in the North West and South West, which during the colonial era had made up the former British Southern Cameroon.² The demonstrating Anglophone lawyers and teachers feared that the central state was preparing to remake these systems, which followed the British model, to conform with French norms. The government's heavy-handed response to these protests gradually hardened public opinion in the two regions, leading to calls for secession and the emergence of radical groups that resorted to violence and intimidation to fuel the political crisis. Conflict has raged ever since.

But in another sense, the Anglophone unrest traces back to the colonial period and the country's struggle to strike a balance between federal control and centralisa-

¹ For background, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°250, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, 2 August 2017; N°272, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks*, 2 May 2019; and N°307, *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict*, 23 February 2022. See also Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°130, *Cameroon's Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures*, 19 October 2017; N°138, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue*, 25 April 2018; and N°142, *Cameroon: Divisions Widen Ahead of Presidential Vote*, 3 October 2018.

² See Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, op. cit.

tion in the decades following decolonisation. Contemporary Cameroon is a combination of two territories that were ruled by the French and British empires. The Anglophone regions were known during the colonial period as Southern Cameroon and administered by Britain as part of Nigeria. The balance of the territory that makes up modern-day Cameroon was ruled by France until its independence on 1 January 1960.

At the time of decolonisation, many among Southern Cameroon's population favoured forming an independent nation.³ But Britain, which administered the territory under a UN trust, and other countries argued that the territory was too small to be economically viable. It joined with the UN in deciding that there should be a plebiscite to give inhabitants a choice between joining Nigeria or unifying with the newly independent state formed from Francophone Cameroon. On 11 February 1961, voters chose to go the latter route and the former British and French colonies became unified.⁴

Power in post-independence Cameroon was at first somewhat decentralised. The newly independent state was first constituted as a two-state federation called the Federal Republic of Cameroon. It comprised West Cameroon, which had been Southern Cameroon under British rule, and East Cameroon, made up of territories that had been ruled by France.

But within a few years, that began to change. In 1966, President Ahmadou Ahidjo instituted a one-party system, in a move that sidelined political rivals, though it was ostensibly meant to promote national unity. Six years later, he pushed through a referendum on a new constitution that gave him more powers and renamed the country the United Republic of Cameroon. Ahidjo claimed at the time that the federal structure was too costly and prevented him from pursuing his development agenda.⁵ A single national government took control of Anglophone primary education, social affairs, local administration, agricultural trade, public works and other minor affairs run by the erstwhile government of West Cameroon.⁶

President Paul Biya, who succeeded Ahidjo in 1982 and holds power to this day, bolstered centralisation, using Cameroon's unitary state structure as a means of closely managing state prerogatives and funding decisions.⁷ Over the years, Biya deftly used the supremacy of state power to consolidate his position. He single-handedly filled many senior and mid-level government posts, from the deans at public universities to the administrators of hospitals, and appointed officials at over 100 state-owned enterprises and agencies.⁸ In February 1984, Biya changed the country's name to the Republic of Cameroon – a move that angered many Anglophones.

³ N.F. Awasom, "The Reunification Question in Cameroon History: Was the Bride an Enthusiastic or a Reluctant One?", *Africa Today*, vol. 47, no. 2 (Spring 2000); Bongfen Chem-Langhëë, "The Road to the Unitary State of Cameroon, 1959-1972", *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, no. 41 (1995).

⁴ "The Future of the Trust Territory of the Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration", UN General Assembly, 15th session, 1960-1961.

⁵ On 6 May 1972, Ahidjo told the National Assembly that he intended to change the constitution to yield what he called an "indivisible republic", with one government and one assembly. Chem-Langhëë, "The Road to the Unitary State of Cameroon, 1959-1972", op cit.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Paul Biya dirige le Cameroun depuis 40 ans et pourrait bien rester au pouvoir", *The Conversation*, 28 November 2022.

⁸ The unitary constitution grants the president power to make these far-reaching appointments. Even though parastatal institutions have a board of directors, it is the president who appoints the

This authoritarian system survived until the early 1990s, when a global economic slump coincided with worldwide calls for democratisation as totalitarian regimes in Eastern and Central Europe collapsed. In 1990, Cameroon approved a raft of new laws that allowed for multiparty politics, leading various political parties to register in 1991. Meanwhile, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF), launched in Bamenda in the North West in 1990, called for a return to the federal structure. The government violently repressed a series of protests organised by students calling for democratic elections.⁹ But, as discussed below, efforts to loosen Biya's grip on power, which sprang from a cross-section of voices within society and not just Anglophones, met with only limited success. Despite Yaoundé's periodic commitments to decentralise aspects of governance, power in Cameroon remains very much concentrated in the capital.

Opposition to centralisation in Cameroon's Anglophone regions is rooted in linguistic and cultural identity. But concentration of decision-making authority in the centre also poses practical problems that are evident to many Cameroonians elsewhere in the country. During the period of centralisation, authorities designed Yaoundé not just to be the national capital but also to deal with seemingly minor matters that in most cases could be handled more cheaply and efficiently at the local level.

Little has changed today. For example, officials in Yaoundé are responsible for approving the construction of secondary roads and new classrooms throughout the country.¹⁰ A secondary school teacher based in Yagoua in the Far North must travel 2,762km round-trip, spending a total of six days on the road, to resolve an administrative issue such as a salary payment or a transfer request.¹¹ An Anglophone person in the North West town of Kumbo who has graduated from a foreign institution must travel 900km round-trip on bad roads to Yaoundé to submit documents for a degree equivalency to a committee that sits only once a month. Contractors around the country suffer similar ordeals in signing deals and chasing compensation in the capital.¹²

B. *The Struggle for Democracy and the Anglophone Movement*

The emergence of the Anglophone movement is in many ways intertwined with the struggle for democracy that has played out in Cameroon for more than three decades.

As noted, opposition to Cameroon's centralised state started growing in the 1990s amid a global push for democratisation that prompted several African countries to abandon their one-party systems. Following national pressure for democratic re-

managing directors and the boards' members. President Biya uses the system to carefully manage political privileges and strike an ethnic balance within the country. Crisis Group interviews, former member of National Assembly, Douala; opposition politicians, Yaoundé, February-July 2020.

⁹ The SDF formed a coalition with several other opposition parties to challenge Biya in the 1992 election. Its leader John Fru Ndi garnered 35.97 per cent of the vote to Biya's 39.98 per cent.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, woman leader and politician, Buea, September 2022.

¹¹ Getting access to retirement benefits is another bureaucratic ordeal. Retired civil servants must sometimes make several trips to Yaoundé, meeting a number of officials to sign various papers, before they can start receiving a pension. Crisis Group interview, retired worker, Yaoundé, September 2022.

¹² The National Commission for the Evaluation of Training Domains Offered Abroad, housed by the Ministry of Higher Education, issues equivalences for academic qualifications obtained abroad. It sits in Yaoundé. Applicants must submit their files in person. In 2022, it held four sessions in which it reviewed more than 5,600 files in total.

form, in November 1991, President Biya organised a tripartite conference, bringing together the government, opposition parties and civil society to reform the electoral process, broaden access to state media and convince the opposition to end general strikes known as “ghost town” operations. Though this move angered the opposition, which had demanded a sovereign national conference whose decisions would be binding upon the government, key leaders participated, paving the way for legislative and presidential elections in 1992. The tripartite conference also set up a commission to propose a revision of the 1972 constitution.¹³

In October 1992, President Biya narrowly beat John Fru Ndi, the Anglophone SDF leader, in a hotly contested election that many Cameroonians perceived as rigged. (Fru Ndi claimed victory and disputed the official result, to no avail.) The ensuing general strikes coincided with fresh Anglophone demands for greater autonomy in education, such as the creation of an examination board separate from the national education ministry, and an English-language university.¹⁴

In 1993 and 1994, community leaders met at an All Anglophone Conference held in Buea, in the South West, and Bamenda, in the North West, following Biya's setting up of a committee to review the 1972 constitution promised at the 1991 tripartite gathering. The Conference called for bringing back the federal structure discarded in the 1970s and creating separate Anglophone institutions. Other Anglophone movements began pushing for secession.¹⁵

Against this backdrop, Biya took steps toward decentralisation and, in particular, toward meeting Anglophone demands. In 1993, he split the state University of Yaoundé into six, creating the University of Buea as the first Anglophone institution of higher learning. Then, as school protests continued, he authorised the creation of two separate examination boards, the Office du Baccalauréat du Cameroun, based in Yaoundé, for French speakers and the Cameroon General Certificate of Education Board, located in Buea, for English speakers.¹⁶ But these measures did not satisfy the protesters.

As Cameroonians across the country took to the streets calling for democratic freedoms, and Anglophones demanded a review of the union, the government used the promise of further decentralisation to appease them. It was not enough. In 1994, Anglophone leaders, John Ngu Foncha and Bernard Muna, both former prime ministers of West Cameroon and vice presidents of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, resigned from the Consultative Committee for Review of the Constitution as it became clear that returning to a federal structure was not on the table. They launched diplomatic moves at the UN to seek support for the independence of what was once Southern Cameroon.¹⁷

¹³ “Tripartite conference and birth of new institutions”, *Cameroon Tribune*, 14 April 2021.

¹⁴ Anglophone groups held large conferences to pressure the government. These movements included the Southern Cameroon National Council (whose leaders are among the separatists whom authorities in Nigeria arrested and who are now serving life prison terms in Yaoundé), the Cameroon Anglophone Movement, Southern Cameroons Youth League and teachers' groups.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Francis B. Nyamnjoh and Richard Fonteh Akum, *The Cameroon GCE Crisis: A Test of Anglophone Solidarity* (Bamenda/Buea, 2008).

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Willibroad Dze-Ngwa, professor, September 2022. Anglophone groups withdrew from the constitutional review when Joseph Owona, who was representing the government,

In November 1995, with the central government again under pressure, parliament debated a new draft constitution that – while short of moving all the way to federalism – included a number of measures that on their face shifted authority away from Yaoundé. Beyond deeming Cameroon to be a “unitary decentralised” state – rather than simply a unitary one, as the 1972 charter had called it – the new charter purported to devolve power from the capital by creating regions to be run principally by regional and local councils. It introduced a presidential term of seven years, limiting chief executives to two. It also included a clause – the foundation of what more than twenty years later would become the Special Status – saying the law may take into account the specificities of certain regions with regard to organisation and functioning.¹⁸ Biya approved the text on 18 January 1996, even as disgruntled Anglophone leaders lobbied the UN and foreign countries to express their dissatisfaction with it.¹⁹

In the event, implementation was quite uneven. On one hand, Biya set up new institutions to promote decentralisation, such as a Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development, a National Decentralisation Council, managed by the prime minister, and a National Advanced School of Local Administration to train civil servants.²⁰ He also revitalised the Fonds Spécial d'Équipement et d'Intervention Intercommunale, a specialised financial and economic development agency for municipal councils, extending its competence to regional councils and including the power to raise funds.²¹ But despite creating a decentralisation apparatus and holding some National Decentralisation Council meetings, the government in Yaoundé largely retained the authority it had nominally assigned to the decentralised bodies.²²

The national government dragged its feet when it came to the nitty gritty of devolving authority, citing financial difficulties.²³ Officials at institutions in the capital moved slowly to make changes, fearing that they would lose power and privileges.²⁴ In the

made clear that Yaoundé would not consider returning to a federation. Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Part X on Regional and Local Councils, Article 62 (2) of Cameroon's 1996 constitution. “Without prejudice to the provisions of this Part, the law may take into consideration the specificities of certain Regions with regard to their organisation and functioning”.

¹⁹ N. Jua and P. Konings, “Occupation of Public Space Anglophone Nationalism in Cameroon”, *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, vol. 175 (2004); P. Konings and F.B. Nyamnjoh, “Anglophone Secessionist Movements in Cameroon”, *Secessionism in African Politics* (Boston, 2019).

²⁰ The government created the school in March 2020, adapting an existing centre for training council staff in Buea.

²¹ “Ce décret étend les compétences du FEICOM”, *Cameroon Tribune*, 2 November 2018.

²² President Biya created the National Decentralisation Council in 2004, reorganising it in 2020. It assesses decentralisation's progress and recommends further action to the president. Crisis Group interviews, South West and North West regional assembly members, Buea and Bamenda, September-October 2022.

²³ Crisis Group interview, South West regional assembly member, Buea, September 2022. “Décentralisation: la masse salariale des communes et régions du Cameroun (25 milliards de FCFA) inquiète l'État”, *Investir au Cameroun*, 20 June 2022. Other changes included a Constitutional Council separate from the Supreme Court and a bicameral parliament, with the creation of a Senate. The Senate started operations in 2013, while the Constitutional Council opened in 2018.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, official of government commission, Yaoundé, May 2022. In June 2021, Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute, chairing a meeting of the National Decentralisation Council, ordered ministerial departments to transfer responsibilities to regional and local councils at once,

mid-2000s, President Biya and his government began reorganising the existing town and city councils and creating new ones, as well as establishing rules governing their activities. But the regional councils were never set up. Consequently, the only effective devolution concerned a handful of powers related to agriculture, urban development, social affairs, health and basic education, which were vested in local and regional councils.²⁵ Importantly, the government did not complete fiscal decentralisation, which would have allowed the regional and local councils to raise taxes.²⁶

More than 28 years after the 1996 constitution came into force, decentralised bodies continue to face a plethora of problems. The charter sets up a three-tiered system of national, regional and municipal government, and the two lower levels have struggled for the entire period since their creation. Mayors running city councils deplore Yaoundé's enduring dominance, while the presidents of the regional councils remain subject to the administrative control of governors appointed by the central state.²⁷ Ministers in Yaoundé decide which powers to devolve to the regional or local level on a case-by-case basis. The national government treats the regional councils as forums for discussing a range of concerns, such as primary schools, health centres, transport, social affairs and culture. But it does not expect them to make big decisions. Even local spending requires approval from the governor.

Perhaps decentralisation's weakest link is the lack of sufficient funding for local and regional government. A 2019 law set aside a minimum of 15 per cent of annual state revenue to make the regional institutions function and allow them to perform some of their duties. In subsequent years, however, the government has never allocated the full amount that was committed to implementation of decentralisation in 2019, though that amount increased sharply from previous years.²⁸ In 2022, it allocated only about 7 per cent, which in 2023 became 8 per cent, leaving councils with few resources to meet their responsibilities.²⁹ In 2021, when councils recruited staff to

when it became apparent that nineteen ministries were reluctant to do so. "Conseil national de la décentralisation pour l'année 2022", *Cameroon Tribune*, 18 June 2021.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, North West regional assembly member, Bamenda, September 2022. Even in the areas of health, agriculture, social affairs and basic education, local councils struggled to make a positive impact, as they lacked adequate funds and qualified personnel.

²⁶ Under decentralisation, the government embarked on council finance reform in piecemeal fashion, passing laws on local finance in 2009 and 2010. But as of 2022, local council officials were still petitioning the government to provide the promised funding.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, town councillors, Bamenda, October 2022.

²⁸ The decentralisation allocation ranged between 7 and 10 billion CFA francs (\$12-17 million) per year between 2010 and 2018, rising to 49 billion CFA francs (\$82 million) per year in 2019 and 2020. In 2021, it went up nearly fivefold to 232 billion CFA francs (\$387 million). Prime ministerial and presidential decrees. V.P. Essomba, "General Allocation for Decentralisation and Financing of Decentralised Local Authorities in the Central Region of Cameroon", June 2021.

²⁹ The government set the general allocation for decentralisation in the 2022 national budget at 232 billion CFA francs (\$382 million), 7.2 per cent of the budget. This proportion is far below the 15 per cent target set by the 2019 law as well as the 600-800 billion CFA franc (\$989 million-\$1.3 billion) range local council officials had requested. The 2023 budget raised the decentralisation allocation to 252 billion CFA francs, representing 8 per cent of the national budget. "Décentralisation: la dotation générale fixée à 232 milliards Fcfa en 2022", *Ecomatin*, 29 December 2021 ; "Loi de finances: 252,6 milliards Fcfa destinés à la décentralisation en 2023", *Ecomatin*, 1 January 2023.

fill new positions created by law, the government complained that personnel costs were too high.³⁰

Understandably, there is significant scepticism among Cameroonians about whether the government is serious about decentralisation. With power still in effect concentrated in the capital, many citizens see decentralisation as little but a buzzword circulating in Yaoundé's bureaucracy. They see little impact of devolution in their daily lives.³¹ Some local authorities maintain a hopeful perspective – saying they see it as a potential way to design policy that reflects local priorities instead of Yaoundé's, although one that has not yet achieved its promise.³² But politicians in the SDF and other opposition parties characterise decentralisation as ill-suited to addressing the complex problems Cameroon faces. Many cite the government's approach to it as evidence that the 1996 constitution did not do enough to reorient a system anchored in centralisation.³³

Accordingly, some of them have returned to the idea espoused by Anglophone leaders in the 1990s: a reversion to federalism, with federal states holding more power to govern. Indeed, the SDF, led by 2018 presidential candidate Joshua Osih (an Anglophone), has campaigned for federalism since the 1990s. Osih and other proponents argue that reorganising the state around a federalist model would preserve national unity, weakening the appeal of separatism among Anglophones, while better managing ethnic tensions with more balanced development across the country and generally reducing the risks of instability.³⁴ Nor is it just Anglophones who hold such views: Maurice Kamto (Cameroon Renaissance Movement) and Cabral Libii (Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation), Francophone opposition candidates who finished, respectively, second and third in the 2018 presidential election, have swung around to supporting forms of federalism.³⁵

The federalists have their enemies. Since the Anglophone conflict began, both the government and armed separatists have targeted them – seeing them as going too far in one case and not far enough in the other. The effect has been to silence many.³⁶ But as the conflict enters its seventh year, to all intents and purposes at a stalemate, and with the voices of Francophone opposition politicians now canvassing for a federation, these views have gained a fresh airing of late.³⁷

³⁰ “Communes: la masse salariale annuelle du personnel passe à 25 milliards de FCFA”, *Ecomatin*, 26 June 2022.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Yaoundé and Buea, October 2022.

³² Crisis Group interviews, councillors, Limbe, Buea and Bamenda, September-December 2022.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, academics, Yaoundé, October 2022.

³⁴ “Dieudonné Essomba: ‘Pour s’opposer au fédéralisme, un grand nombre d’individus prétendent qu’il va aggraver le repli identitaire’”, *Actu Cameroun*, 25 November 2021.

³⁵ Kamto and Libii are both recent converts to federalism.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Felix Agbor Nkongho, former leader of Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium and human rights lawyer, Buea, May 2022.

³⁷ Some in government have come to terms with the limitations of the Special Status and no longer deny the need to talk with separatists and revise the policy. Crisis Group interviews, officials, Yaoundé, August-December 2022.

III. The Special Status

A. Overview: Creating the Special Status

As the government paid lip service to the 1996 constitution's decentralisation provisions, Anglophone discontent increased. Frustrated with the 1996 model, the 2016 protesters did not call for decentralisation: they demanded instead a return to a federation or secession from the Francophone-dominated state.

Three years into the crisis, in 2019, President Biya convened a major national dialogue. Under pressure from rising militant violence, and amid growing international concern about human rights abuses committed by both sides, Biya vowed to address "the sources of frustration" suffered by Cameroonians in the North West and South West by fast-tracking the decentralisation process.³⁸ As an outcome of the dialogue – which is discussed further below – the government turned to a little-known provision of the 1996 constitution. That provision, as described briefly above, had deemed any region to be eligible for what the charter alluded to as "the specificities of certain Regions".³⁹ It had created a mechanism for giving them a measure of greater autonomy, though the government had never passed the laws necessary to make that happen.

Invoking this provision for the North West and South West, the government formalised the Special Status designation in a law signed on 24 December 2019, which also fleshed out what it would mean.⁴⁰ Under the General Code of Regional and Local Authorities (2019), the government established regional "assemblies" for each of the North West and South West. This move signalled that these regions would enjoy greater powers than the regional "councils" created in Cameroon's eight Francophone regions after 1996.

The Anglophone assemblies, at least in theory, have all the authority of the Francophone councils, but also a broader remit and some additional prerogatives. The 2019 law provides for the assemblies to participate (at Yaoundé's invitation) in drafting policy regarding the Anglophone educational sub-system, run regional development institutions and help define the status of traditional chiefs – all powers that the Francophone councils do not have. It says Yaoundé may consult the assemblies about judicial policy for the common law sub-system operating in the Anglophone regions, which is distinct from the French-derived civil law system in other regions. Lastly, it allows the government to invite the assemblies to help administer public services in the North West and South West. (In practice, as discussed below, the assemblies have tended not to participate in educational and judicial policy formation. Nor have they weighed in on other matters going to the core of Anglophone identity.)

The Anglophone regional assemblies are also organised differently from the Francophone councils. Whereas the latter have a single house of 90 members, the Anglo-

³⁸ Biya delivered a "message to the nation" about why he convened the dialogue, posted at the government's dedicated website for the event.

³⁹ Part X on Regional and Local Councils, Article 62(2), *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ The 1996 constitution provided for creating ten regional councils (two of which were transformed by the Special Status into regional assemblies), but the government did not pass the necessary laws until after the October 2019 national dialogue. Law No. 2019/24 of 24 December 2019, the General Code for Regional and Local Authorities, outlined the councils' composition and powers. In its section V, it defined the North West and South West as Special Status regions in accordance with the constitution's Article 62.

phone assemblies are bicameral: each comprises a 70-member House of Divisional Representatives indirectly elected by town councils and a twenty-member House of Chiefs selected by the members' peers. The assemblies also vote for the regional executive, composed of a president, vice president, three thematic commissioners and three administrative staff.⁴¹ The law makes the president the region's chief executive, though without clarifying his or her relationship to the governor named by Yaoundé.⁴²

While the process for creating it was flawed and the practical impact little understood by ordinary Cameroonians, as discussed below, the recognition of the Anglophone regions' Special Status was at the very least an important legal step. Through the 2019 legislation, for the first time, the national government recognised that the two Anglophone regions are different from the eight Francophone ones due to their unique political history, and in so doing acknowledged the existence of an Anglophone identity distinct from that embraced by the Francophone majority.⁴³ While many Anglophones once again perceived the measure as too little, too late, some observers hailed it as potentially ushering in a return to normalcy in the restive regions.⁴⁴ Some separatists viewed the authorities' step as a cynical gesture, questioning the president's authority to unilaterally confer a Special Status upon their regions, which, they argued, entered the 1961 federal union on the basis of equality with the Francophone part.⁴⁵

As soon became clear, the Special Status is not remotely a magic wand, and it has some downsides. The decision to provide each region with a separate assembly appears to have prevented the regional bodies from mutual talks about crucial matters common to Anglophones. Further, the law's provisions only partially respond to Anglophone demands regarding education, which are at the core of their grievances against the central state. As discussed below, there are also myriad other issues with respect to the way in which the concept was developed, rolled out and implemented (or not implemented) that have impeded its effectiveness in either reallocating power or defusing tensions. In order to tap its potential, the full complement of issues will need attention.

B. *A Unilateral Process*

One widely perceived problem with the Special Status is that the government introduced it without adequately consulting the Anglophone community. Yaoundé blocked Anglophone groups from holding a general conference prior to the 2019 national dialogue, though Cardinal Christian Tumi, a major Anglophone leader, had suggested

⁴¹ The Francophone regional councils are headed by a president who is assisted by a regional bureau comprising a first vice president, a vice president, two secretaries and two questors. The Anglophone regional executive bureaus have eight members: a president (who is also president of the house of divisional representatives), a vice president (who is president of the house of chiefs), three thematic commissioners (economic development; health and social affairs; and education, sports and culture), two secretaries and one questor.

⁴² In both regions, the executive council is made up mostly of retired senior government administrators.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, North West and South West assembly members, Buea and Bamenda, October 2022.

⁴⁴ "Cameroon's conflict: Will the National Dialogue make any difference?", BBC, 5 October 2019.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, separatist leaders and lawyers, Yaoundé and by telephone, August 2022–January 2023.

a convening at Buea – with public consultations – to develop and unify behind a common proposal for resolving the conflict. Anglophone representatives felt that, by preventing their coordination, Yaoundé ensured that pro-government officials would dominate the proceedings.⁴⁶ Most importantly, the government did not invite key separatist leaders; nor did it make any serious arrangements for them to participate. Some militants boycotted the discussion. Though the Prime Minister's Office sent invitations to some separatist activists abroad, a military tribunal scheduled trials for two of them on the day the dialogue opened. The government did not invite separatist leaders imprisoned in Yaoundé.

Additionally, the dialogue studiously avoided debate of Anglophone demands for federalism, let alone secession. Pro-government representatives even booed notable Anglophone figures who called for a session on federalism.⁴⁷ Instead, it considered the proposal from a Francophone former minister, Edouard Akame Mfoumou, for a Special Status for the Anglophone regions. The dialogue conference adopted this proposal as one of more than 30 resolutions, without discussion of its particulars.

In December, the proposal was transformed into law, with the government relying on religious leaders to win popular support for the measure. For example, in November 2019, Andrew Nkea, then bishop of Mamfe, organised a caravan at the government's urging to explain the dialogue's outcome to people in the South West, while Cardinal Tumi did the same in the North West, despite his well-known support for returning to the federation.⁴⁸ Such efforts, however, proved insufficient to build broad public backing.

Indeed, the government's unilateral moves left many Anglophones resentful. Several prominent Anglophones interviewed by Crisis Group say they have little knowledge of the Special Status framework or the new regional institutions it created, and assembly members interviewed appear less than fully convinced of the new institutions' effectiveness.⁴⁹ Women leaders say the lack of general consultation deprived them of an opportunity to enrich the proposal by introducing gender-differentiated concerns and perspectives.⁵⁰ By pursuing the Special Status with so little debate, the government practically guaranteed that the policy would lack local buy-in. While some Anglophones considered it a step in the right direction, the process left many others

⁴⁶ Anglophone leaders proposed to hold a general conference in Buea, with public consultations, in order to develop unified Anglophone proposals for resolving the conflict. Crisis Group interviews, Elie Smith, aide to the prime minister and former secretary of Cardinal Tumi's proposed All Anglophone Conference, Yaoundé, September and December 2022; and Felix Agbor Nkongho, former leader of the Anglophone Civil Society Consortium and human rights lawyer, Buea, May 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Felix Agbor Nkongho, former leader of Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium and human rights lawyer, November 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, regional assembly members, politicians, Buea and Bamenda, August-December 2022.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, regional assembly members, town councillors, women leaders, journalists and businesspeople, various locations in the North West, South West, Centre and Littoral regions, August-December 2022.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, women leaders, Buea and Bamenda, September-December 2022. For example, women would have called for the assemblies to pay more attention to conflict-related gender-based violence, set gender quotas for public bodies, and ensure that sexual health and reproductive rights are factored into the assemblies' health projects.

with a bad aftertaste – overall seeming to increase distrust of the Francophone-led government in the Anglophone regions.⁵¹

C. Yaoundé's Control

A second weakness of the Special Status from the Anglophone perspective is that, at least as implemented, the autonomy it affords is quite limited. In reality, the central government retains tight control of the Anglophone regions. The set-up of the regional assemblies mimics the Southern Cameroon institutions existing in Buea between 1957 and 1961, which were then incorporated into the West Cameroon federated state from 1961 to 1972. They comprised a House of Assembly and a House of Chiefs. Even then, during the country's federalist period, there were limits to their power, as the federal government controlled all the sources of revenue and appointed federal inspectors who questioned regional decision-making.⁵² Moreover, the regional assemblies created in 2019 are much weaker than what was expected. They have played no role in the formation of policy in education and other matters that underpin Anglophone identity issues.⁵³

A core problem is that the current North West and South West governors, both of whom are Francophones appointed by Yaoundé and protecting its interests, hold veto power over the assemblies' initiatives.⁵⁴ This power has rendered the assemblies largely toothless. Each of the assemblies must obtain its regional governor's prior approval for (among other things) the budget, expenses, loans and international cooperation agreements, severely curbing independent decision-making.⁵⁵ The law obliges the assemblies to meet in the presence of the governor or his representative. "The governor is the boss we have to please", a regional assemblyman told Crisis Group.⁵⁶ Some assembly members say they regularly resort to self-censorship to avoid conflict with the governor and shy away from bringing up contentious issues such as the education crisis.⁵⁷ Instead, they have mainly carried out awareness campaigns about the Special Status, stuck to routine administrative duties and overseen local projects, such as distributing school supplies.⁵⁸

Perhaps because they feel hemmed in by their governors – and perhaps because they are themselves less than fully representative of the full range of political opinion (as discussed below) – the assemblies have frequently been passive in the face of developments that affect Anglophone equities, even though they had the authority to

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, North West and South West regional assembly members, Buea and Bamenda, September-October 2022.

⁵² Bongfen Chem- Langhëë, "The Origin of the Southern Cameroon House of Chiefs", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1983).

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, local politician, assembly member, Buea, September 2022.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, local political figure, assembly member, Buea, September 2022.

⁵⁵ Regional assembly members resent the governors' interference in their affairs. Meanwhile, residents of the Anglophone regions say these Special Status institutions have done nothing to resolve the conflict, rendering themselves unfit for purpose. Crisis Group interviews, North West and South West assembly members, Buea and Bamenda, September and October 2022.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, North West and South West assembly members, Buea and Bamenda, October 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, South West regional assembly members, September and October 2022.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

address them. For example, in 2022 they took no action when the Bank of Central African States to which Cameroon belongs omitted English-language questions from an exam to recruit new senior staff, creating a barrier for Anglophone candidates.⁵⁹ They likewise kept mum when the government structured medical school entrance exams in a manner that appeared to give a leg up to Francophone applicants.⁶⁰ Nor have the assemblies put much pressure on the government to fulfil its 2017 pledge to create a Higher Institute of Judicial Studies in the Anglophone regions, which have no law school at present.⁶¹

Against this backdrop, a bright spot concerns the Public Independent Conciliator, an office with an ombudsman-like role created as part of the Special Status. The Conciliators, one in each region, aim to protect the rights of ordinary citizens embroiled in disputes with regional institutions. They can mediate or conciliate to resolve the dispute or report abusive actions to the central government, without prejudice to the possibility of judicial redress. The office can also submit recommendations to Yaoundé for improving policies relating to the Special Status. Since their creation in 2019, the Conciliators have received hundreds of complaints. Generally, according to observers interviewed by Crisis Group, they have handled the complaints fairly and gained users' trust (though some assembly members argue the office has yet to make a serious impact).⁶²

Still, the Conciliators are not an answer to the bulk of the Anglophones' grievances. They have no authority in disagreements between residents of the two Anglophone regions and national institutions.⁶³ In cases of arbitrary arrest and confiscation or destruction of property by the security forces, the only recourse is through the courts. Given the government's determination to press for military victory, however, it has been slow to prosecute soldiers involved in alleged crimes in the Anglophone regions.⁶⁴

Overall, Anglophones do not feel that the Special Status has lifted the central government's yoke. Critics note that the government allocated each regional assembly about \$5 million as a yearly operational budget, exactly what it gave to every Francophone regional council, though the latter bodies supposedly have fewer responsi-

⁵⁹ "Soupçons de népotisme à la BEAC", *Jeune Afrique*, 7 October 2022.

⁶⁰ The government opened the examination period before Anglophone aspirants had received the results of pre-qualification tests. Results of the high school exams in the Francophone sub-system, the Baccalaureate, are traditionally released several weeks before those of GCEs written in the Anglophone sub-system, due to the way the two systems conduct their assessments. In 2022, the Baccalaureate results were released on 27 July while the GCE's were published on 19 August. On July 27, the public health ministry announced a deadline for registration to take the exams on 12 August. Though the ministry noted that GCE candidates could write pending their results, it amounted to a gamble as candidates had to pay 20,000 CFA francs in registration fees. The regional assemblies could have requested that the government delay the exam. Crisis Group interviews, students, Buea, October 2022.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Bamenda-based lawyer, September 2022. Anglophone lawyers typically train in common law jurisdictions in other countries (such as Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia or the UK) and then either apply to a court in Cameroon for recognition of their qualifications or write the Cameroon bar exam organised by the government after pupillage in a law firm. (The government does not organise these exams yearly and, in the past, up to seven years have elapsed between exams.)

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, journalist, faith-based peace campaigner, regional assembly members, Bamenda, September 2022.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, academic, Bamenda, September 2022.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, victims of abuses in the conflict, lawyers, Buea, Limbe and Bamenda, August-November 2022.

bilities. For the detractors, the discrepancy underscored the impression that “not much is special about the Special Status”.⁶⁵

D. *Lack of Local Participation in Regional Assemblies*

A further way in which Anglophones believe the Special Status falls short of their aspirations is that its institutions are not representative of the regions' full range of political opinion or diverse constituencies. The government has filled the regional assemblies with its own supporters, closing the door to politicians with other points of view. It has done so through the town councils, which choose regional assembly members through indirect suffrage. Given that the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement controlled all the town councils, the February 2020 regional assembly elections produced an overwhelming win for President Biya's party.⁶⁶ Thus, the views of regional assembly members do not reflect anything close to the full range of opinion among Anglophones.⁶⁷ Moreover, most of the regional executives who are selected among the assemblies' members are government or ruling-party officials who came out of retirement and were appointed for their loyalty rather than their political commitment to ease Anglophone frustrations.⁶⁸

Many Anglophone women do not think the Special Status is addressing their concerns.⁶⁹ Women were not publicly consulted as stakeholders in defining the content of the framework.⁷⁰ In a sense, the regional system under the Special Status replicates Cameroon's national system, which lacks a mechanism for ensuring that gender-differentiated concerns are taken into account in policymaking or a clear mandate to address women's rights and security. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family has little actual authority and is largely confined to symbolic and ceremonial activities. In any event, its powers were not devolved to the Anglophone regions.

Meantime, women remain under-represented in the Anglophone regions' institutions. The Special Status does not reflect the overall gender ratio in Cameroon, either in the membership or the executive offices of the regional assemblies, despite women playing an important role in the conflict.⁷¹ Though half the population, they make up lower percentages of each 90-member assembly, at circa 23 per cent in each regional assembly. Of the North West executive's eight members, two are women, and

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, North West and South West regional assembly members, Bamenda and Buea, October 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group Reports, *Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline* and *Crisis Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict*, both op. cit. During the 2020 elections, gunmen kidnapped several opposition candidates, while separatists banned electoral activity, mostly limiting voting to government-controlled administrative areas. As a result of the harassment, women's participation in the election declined.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, regional assembly members, researchers, Buea, Bamenda and Yaoundé, May–October 2022. See also Crisis Group Report, *Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline*, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Bamenda, September 2022.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, women leaders, Buea and Bamenda, September–December 2022.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, women civil society leaders and women politicians, Bamenda and Buea, September–December 2022.

⁷¹ For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict*, op. cit.

the South West council has only one. The February 2020 local elections reduced women's representation in office in the Anglophone regions, with threats to women's participation in politics increasing as the fighting intensified.⁷²

IV. Reassessing and Reinventing the Special Status

A. A Second Look at Special Status?

Views of the Special Status predictably diverge in Yaoundé and the Anglophone regions. In December 2022, President Biya said decentralisation was well on track, with powers gradually being devolved from the state to regional and local authorities. At the same time, he made several references to “terrorists” and “terrorist threats” in the North West and South West regions, signalling his uncompromising stance toward separatist movements.⁷³ For their part, many Anglophones say the Special Status has failed to give their regions more powers.⁷⁴ Some leaders in the Anglophone regions and in the diaspora believe that the Special Status is instead being used by the government to tighten its control of the former British Southern Cameroon.⁷⁵ They argue that, through a series of unilateral decisions, Yaoundé created an illusion of autonomy while rejecting talks between equals that would have let them make their case for secession.⁷⁶ The government's unmet promises, sometimes coupled with seemingly contradictory policy decisions, have made separatists deeply suspicious of Yaoundé's initiatives.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, separatist militias have expressed their opposition to the Special Status in the clearest possible way – by continuing to engage in combat with the national army and targeting government officials.⁷⁸ In some cases, their hostility toward the Special Status extends to the Anglophone politicians who participate in its institutions. In 2020, one such group declared that assembly members are a target. In December 2021, the Bambalang Marine Forces militia abducted Fon Kevin Yakum, a traditional ruler who is vice president of the North West regional assembly, in the North West. The government has not yet secured his release.⁷⁹ On 1 May 2022, the Ambazonia Defence Force, another rebel militia, kidnapped Regina Mundi, a member of the national parliament, in Bamenda and freed her a few weeks later in unclear circum-

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Head of State's 2022 End of Year and 2023 New Year Message to the Nation”, Republic of Cameroon, 31 December 2022.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government commission member, Yaoundé, May 2022; South West regional council member, Buea, August 2022.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, separatist leaders, October 2022.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, legal adviser to separatist leaders, Yaoundé, October 2022.

⁷⁸ Assembly members should reside in the districts they represent, but due to the fighting, many are living in small safe zones in urban areas.

⁷⁹ The rebels said they kidnapped Yakum in reprisal for the arrest of family members of a militia commander who goes by the alias General No Pity. In November 2022, his abductors released a videotape of the traditional ruler, offering to release him if the government freed No Pity's relatives. “Separatists demand release of No Pity's family in exchange for NW House of Chiefs President abducted last year”, MimiMefoInfo, 28 November 2022.

stances.⁸⁰ The government has provided key regional officials with their own security details, but even so the abductions have deterred some from performing their duties.⁸¹

Yet despite the lack of buy-in from Anglophones and militias' outright rejection of it, the Special Status could conceivably serve as an important realm for building consensus between the parties in peace talks. As outlined above, the Special Status provides a legal framework for recognising Anglophone identity and increasing regional autonomy under the banner of decentralisation. It could be the starting point for discussions that would allow separatists to put forward their own ideas about how a more functional sub-national arrangement would work. Against the backdrop of separatist's leering about a return to federalism and Yaounde's outright rejection of secession, a discussion kicking off from reform of the Special Status could be the best way for the parties to shape a new policy through compromise. Though it would of course have to be bundled together with other elements – including disarmament and reintegration programs, transitional justice, security sector reform and reconstruction – a reformed Special Status could help move the parties closer to a comprehensive settlement that they can live with.⁸²

To serve this function, the mechanism would need to be adjusted to address the concerns of Anglophones while at the same time maintaining the support of government hardliners. It might not have been possible to pull that off in the past. Today, however, conflict fatigue and the military stalemate could offer an opportunity for compromise.

B. *Forging a Reformed Special Status*

Given that peace talks between the two sides appear to be stalled, it is not clear how or when the issue of a reformed Special Status might arise. Although a Canada-backed initiative appeared briefly to gain traction in early 2023, Yaounde denied that it had asked a “foreign party” to broker peace.⁸³ Since then, none of the relevant parties have made public any information about the status of discussions or any related details. The following discussion presumes that talks in this or some other forum will pick up pace at some stage and offers recommendations for how the elements of a reform might take shape in a way that would work for both sides. As noted above, reaching agreement on Special Status would by no means be the same thing as reaching a comprehensive political settlement between the parties. That said, forging consensus in

⁸⁰ Government forces announced they had freed Mundi after raiding a separatist camp near Batibo in the North West and killing several armed separatists. Statement by Colonel Cyrille Atonfack Guemo, army spokesperson, 31 May 2022. Meanwhile, Capo Daniel of the Ambazonia Defence Force said the rebels had left her behind after a fierce battle that did not cost them any lives. Still others claimed a ransom was paid to secure her release. Crisis Group interviews, Anglophone activist in Europe, government aide in Yaounde and aid worker, Bamenda, June 2022.

⁸¹ Some regional assembly members blame the government for the threats to their safety, saying Yaounde makes them the face of the Special Status policy while denying them the power to satisfy their constituents' demands. Crisis Group interviews, regional assembly members, Buea and Bamenda, September–November 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group Report, *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict*, op. cit.

⁸³ Crisis Group Statement, “Canada Initiative Offers Opportunities for Cameroon Peace Process”, 9 February 2023.

this area would have benefits in its own right and could help create momentum for a broader deal.

1. An inclusive and consensual process

As discussed, a major flaw in the way the Special Status law developed in 2019 is that it did not involve sufficient input from prominent Anglophone voices. This deficiency created an overwhelming aversion to the policy among separatists. To stand a chance of gaining legitimacy in the Anglophone regions, a reformed Special Status will need to be the product of meaningful consultations and reflect major substantive changes, eg, along the lines discussed below. Consultation could take place either as part of peace negotiations or in an adjunct dialogue. The key is that it must involve the government and a representative group of Anglophone separatist leaders, including women leaders. Given the tarnished status of the Special Status framework in its current form, authorities could consider renaming it. That would be an important gesture to Anglophones, in effect acknowledging that the half-measures adopted since 2019 have done little to address their core demands for greater autonomy.

No less important than securing the buy-in of Anglophone elites will be securing popular support. There are two seemingly feasible ways to obtain the public's buy-in for a reformed Special Status. First, the government and separatist leaders could organise a gathering similar to the Anglophone general conference proposed in 2019 by Cardinal Tumi. This gathering would allow the parties to explain the reformed Special Status to Anglophone civil society, which, for its part, could endorse the proposed new provisions or provide feedback for renewed negotiations. Secondly, the government and separatists could lay out the benefits of the changes in law and policy separately to their respective constituencies, by organising targeted meetings with core groups of supporters and hardliners. Either way, the consultations should include focused efforts to elicit women's views, including on substantive political arrangements and on protection issues, as Crisis Group has recommended previously.⁸⁴

2. Mechanisms for making Anglophone voices heard

For a reformed Special Status to present a step forward for Anglophones, it will likely need to create stronger mechanisms for ensuring that Anglophone institutions are effective platforms for voicing Anglophone concerns and are representative of their constituents.

One structural change that could help relates to the regional assemblies. Having two separate assemblies has the effect of weakening the voice of the Anglophone regions absent a formal mechanism for them to coordinate. The two regions have common educational, legal and other sub-systems that need to be assessed and treated as a whole. Any reformed Special Status should provide for joint sessions where the two regional assemblies come together to deliberate and vote on laws concerning the whole Anglophone region, with the technical details for this format to be mutually determined.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict*, op. cit.

Reform would be best done by changing the law. Section 3 of the General Code of Regional and Local Authorities signed in December 2019 recognises the common linguistic and historical heritage of the North West and South West regions, noting their need for special organisation and administration, as well as the importance of respecting the Anglophone educational and common law judicial systems. Section 100 of the law allows regional bodies to form partnerships for common matters, meaning in principle that the North West and South West assemblies could jointly discuss matters of common interest. But, under the present law, the assemblies would first need to seek permission from the government in Yaoundé, something they are unlikely to request given centre-periphery power dynamics. Reforming the Special Status would be an opportunity to amend the law so that it provides for holding joint sessions, at least twice a year, that would focus on judicial, educational and linguistic issues.⁸⁵

Special Status reforms should also include, or be accompanied by, changes that would expand the participation of local actors in the Anglophone regional assemblies. Instituting direct universal suffrage in Anglophone regional assembly elections to replace the current system of indirect voting would give the assemblies greater legitimacy and voters a sense of ownership and autonomy. Another possible step relates to Anglophones who supported secession and are therefore exposed to prosecution for crimes against the state, which would bar them from taking part in elections. By extending the right to vote and to run for elections to all the people enlisted in the voter registry, so long as they have not committed gross human rights abuses or war crimes, the government could demonstrate openness to diverse viewpoints and reduce the appeal of violence as a means of political expression. Ultimately, as part of a broader deal, by making changes to the law on political association, the government could allow separatists who renounce violence to run for regional office either as a political party or as independent candidates.

On the same theme of boosting participation, the reformed Special Status should promote the political participation of women's groups, including those that have been involved in conflict mediation and resolution, and should have a role in shaping post-conflict governance in the Anglophone regions. To this end, it could create a gender and equality commissioner in the regional executive. The commissioner would be responsible for ensuring that gender-differentiated concerns are taken into account in government actions and women are equally represented in regional institutions, among other things. The commissioner would engage with women leaders in civil society and represent their perspectives in both the executive and legislative branches. The existence of this role should complement, not supplant, the engagement of other commissioners with civil society. It should not replace efforts to increase women's direct and equal participation in political spaces.

Finally, another way to provide Anglophones a greater voice with respect to the way they are governed would be to widen the remit of the Public Independent Conciliator to include disputes with national civilian authorities. The government should also consider appointing a deputy public independent conciliator – ideally, a senior military officer – in charge of relations with the national security forces. This person could help reduce tensions between Anglophones and the army and respond to the

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Yaoundé, May 2022.

growing demand for attention to claims against security services in the North West and South West. The deputy's experiences in this realm could be instrumental in designing a security sector reform program as part of a wider peace process when the parties reach that stage.

3. Promoting broader responsibility and better relations

Special Status reforms should also expand regional authorities' responsibilities in the key areas related to Cameroonian Anglophone identity, notably education, language and judicial affairs.⁸⁶ The government and Anglophone stakeholders will have to negotiate the extent of powers of the regional assemblies in these three areas, but the assemblies should have, at a minimum, the ability to propose new laws on those topics without waiting for Yaoundé to initiate the process. This change would allow the assemblies to debate Anglophones' longstanding grievances and participate in deciding issues of fundamental importance to their community. These laws would still need to be signed by the president of the republic, but the power to initiate legislation at the regional assembly level would help focus regional decision-making in the national legislative process – creating a stronger sense of Anglophone agency and potentially improving the relationship with Yaoundé.

To improve lines of communication and help ensure that laws and policies linked to the new Special Status are consistently implemented across the national government, Yaoundé should also consider appointing a senior official responsible for coordinating all its actions in the Anglophone regions. This official, who should have the rank of state minister, would answer directly to the president and coordinate among ministries and agencies to align positions in the capital on matters relating to the conflict in the North West and South West. Such a measure could reduce the number of contradictory policies emanating from the national government and help build trust between the two parties.

Yaoundé can also help to prove its seriousness about a reformed Special Status by making sure the regional assemblies have the funding to do their jobs. The government should transfer 15 per cent of the national budget to the decentralised bodies as stipulated in 2019, while considering an increase to cover the expense of fulfilling the additional responsibilities created by the reforms discussed above. It is crucial that the new, elected regional assemblies have enough resources to cover operational expenses and deliver on their mandate in areas such as education, health and infrastructure. The regional executive should at the same time create measures to guarantee transparency in use of these funds.

⁸⁶ New responsibilities could include, among others, harmonised university governance, Franco-phone judges in Anglophone courts and an education policy drive across the two sub-systems.

V. Conclusion

Cameroon's Special Status policy for the North West and South West regions, adopted in 2019, was a step toward acknowledging the distinct Anglophone identity in the majority-Francophone country. Yet it has significant flaws: the national government imposed the Special Status without sufficiently consulting key Anglophone figures. It then created regional assemblies with hamstrung legislative powers and without a formal mechanism for working together on issues of mutual interest. Indirectly elected, they are not representative of the regional population, and they appear to lack an appetite for raising the educational, judicial and linguistic issues of greatest interest to their Anglophone constituents.

Against this backdrop, the parties should give Special Status a second look – considering how it could become a mechanism for better empowering regional assemblies and helping address Anglophones' political grievances, and perhaps even become a rare area of agreement between the government and the Anglophone separatists. As the conflict drags on with no end in sight, it is critical that the government and separatists find common ground on which to rebuild trust and start forging a new path to a political solution. Whether or not reforming the Special Status could serve this end is not clear, but after six years of fighting, it is worth a try.

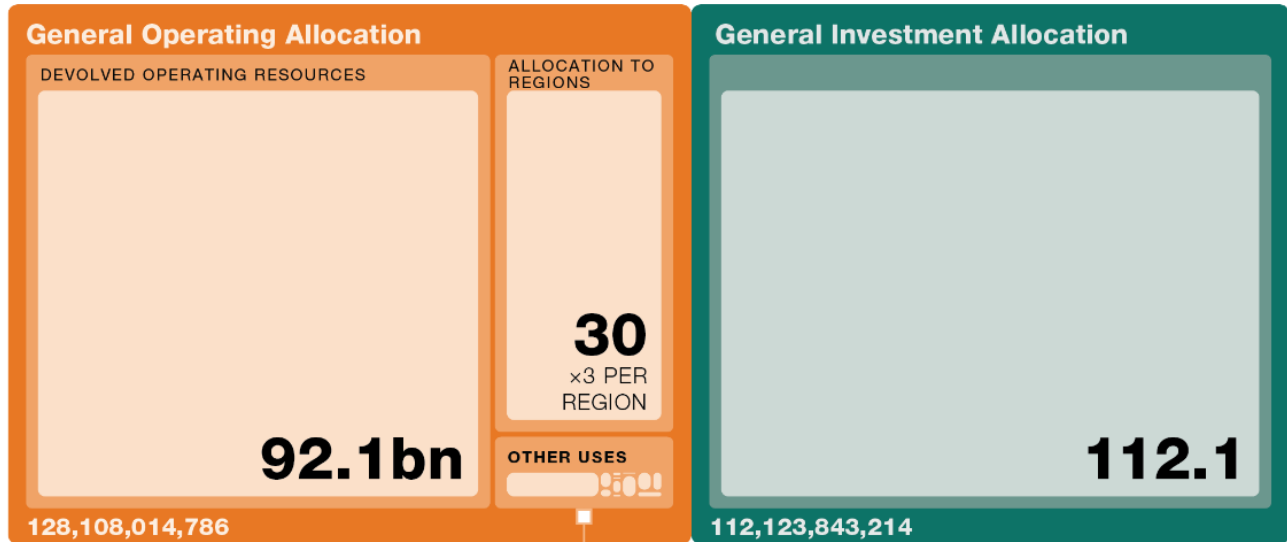
Nairobi/New York/Brussels, 31 March 2023

Appendix A: Map of Cameroon

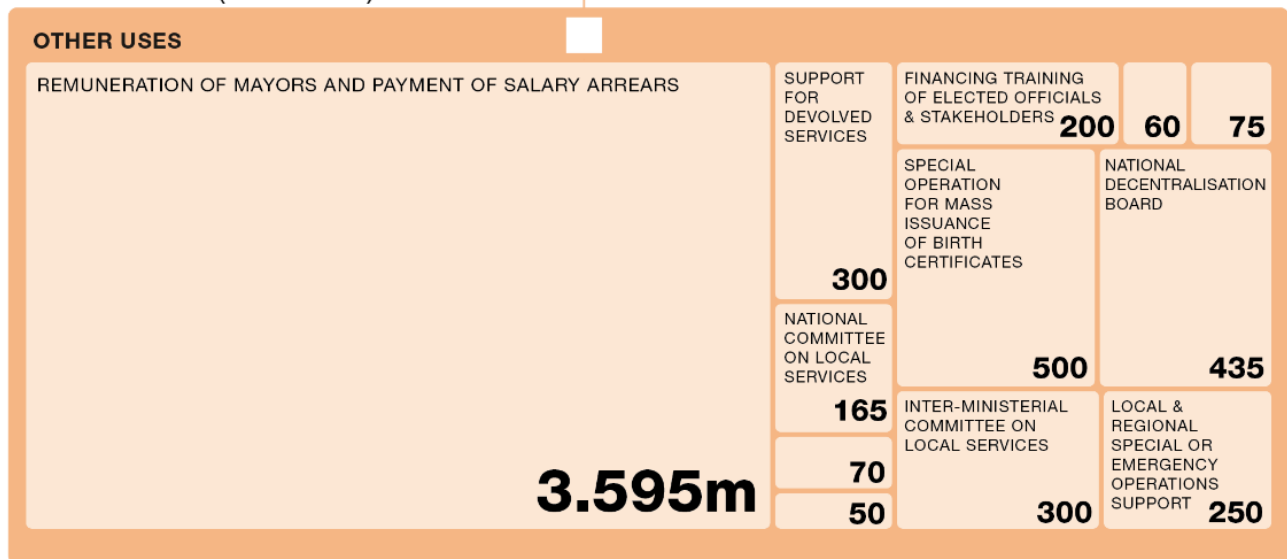


Appendix B: Distribution of the Common Decentralisation Fund (2022)

240.2 billion CFAF (in millions)



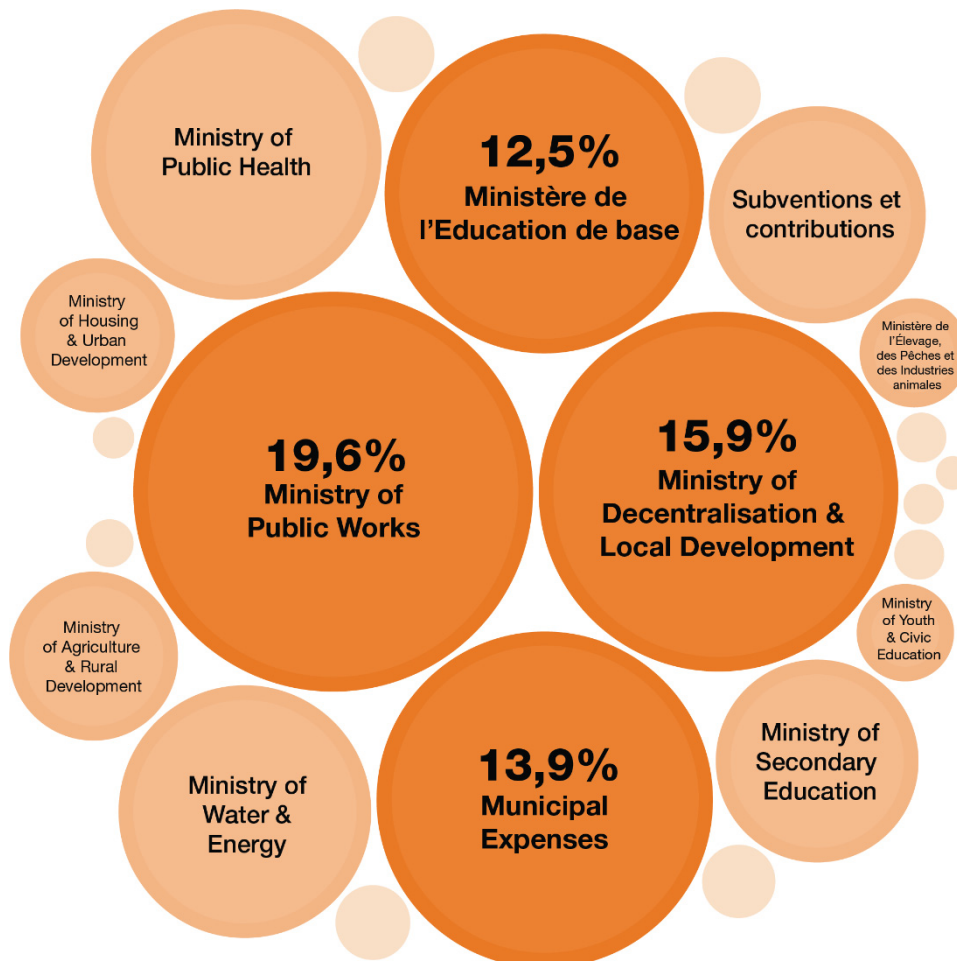
6 billion CFAF (in millions)



Note: In "other uses", the remaining 50 million CFAF are allocated to the functioning of the committee in charge of monitoring procedures for payment of the basic salary of local executives, 60m to support the National Skilled Trade Training Program, 70m to the functioning of Inter-ministerial Commission on Decentralised Cooperation and 75m to support council trade unions.

Source: Decree No. 2023/034 of 20 January 2023 laying down the distribution of the Common Decentralisation Fund for financial year 2022.

Appendix C: Distribution of Decentralisation Resources by Sectoral Ministries (2023)



Note: The smaller circles are ministries whose allocations fall below 200,000 million CFAF (Forestry and Wildlife; Sports and Physical Education; Trade; the Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development; Social Affairs; Arts and Culture, Small and Medium Enterprises; Social Economy and Handicrafts; Employment and Vocational Training, Tourism and Leisure; Promotion of Women and the Family).

Source: "Cameroon citizen budget 2023", Cameroon Ministry of Finance, 6 January 2023

Appendix D: Cameroon Decentralisation Timeline

1 January 1960

The République du Cameroun achieves independence from France, with Ahmadou Ahidjo as President.

11 February 1961

In a plebiscite supervised by the UN, British Southern Cameroon votes for independence and reunification with the already independent République du Cameroun, forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

20 May 1972

President Ahidjo, via a national referendum, abolishes Cameroon's federal system, replacing it with a unitary state.

2 June 1972

The government adopts a new constitution. The country's name changes from the Federal Republic of Cameroon to the United Republic of Cameroon.

6 November 1982

Prime Minister Paul Biya succeeds Ahidjo as president, following the latter's resignation.

4 February 1984

President Biya changes the country's name from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon, a return to the Francophone part's name at independence.

23 October 1992

Biya wins the presidential election by a small margin (39.9 per cent) over his Anglophone opponent John Fru Ndi (35.5 per cent). Fru Ndi has the support of many Anglophones, having promised a return to a federation. Protests and general strikes paralyse parts of the country.

2-3 April 1993

The first All Anglophone Conference takes place in Buea, resulting in the Buea Declaration. Anglophones demand a return to the federal state and separate Anglophone institutions.

1 July 1993

The government succumbs to pressure after months of school boycotts and creates the Cameroon General Certificate of Education Board to run Anglophone exams. The authorities split the University of Yaoundé into six institutions, creating the University of Buea, the first higher education institution in the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

29 April-2 May 1994

The second All Anglophone Conference takes place in Bamenda and reiterates the call for a return to a federation as agreed at reunification in 1961.

18 January 1996

Following five years of surging Anglophone nationalism, with proponents calling for either a return to the two-state federation or secession, the government adopts a new constitution making Cameroon a decentralised unitary state. Decentralisation exists primarily on paper.

22 July 2004

Key decentralisation laws are voted on the policy's orientation, the rules applicable to councils and regions.

11 October 2016

Lawyers in the Anglophone regions boycott courts and commence demonstrations calling for a return to a federation or outright separation to protect the Anglophone minority. Police crack down on protesters in Buea and Bamenda.

21 November 2016

Teachers in the Anglophone regions join the lawyers' protests. Anglophones start boycotting schools.

22 September 2017

Following government arrests of civil society leaders and hundreds of civilians because they refused to call off the general strikes, there are mass pro-independence demonstrations in the North West and South West regions.

1 October 2017

An Anglophone protest leader declares symbolic independence for Southern Cameroon, which separatists call Ambazonia. Government troops brutally crack down on pro-independence demonstrations, killing dozens of civilians. As the government intensifies arrests, people start to form self-defence militias.

30 November 2017

President Biya's government declares war on Anglophone separatists who killed about a dozen government troops.

2 March 2018

The government creates the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development.

30 September-4 October 2019

The government organises the Major National Dialogue, without the participation of key Anglophone separatist leaders.

3 October 2019

The National Dialogue discusses a proposal on the "Special Status".

24 December 2019

President Biya signs a law granting Special Status to the North West and South West regions.

9 February 2020

Cameroon holds municipal council and legislative elections amid an Anglophone boycott, violence and insecurity.

2 March 2020

The government creates the National Advanced School of Local Administration to train staff for decentralised authorities. It replaces the Local Government Training Centre in Buea.

6 December 2020

Cameroonians vote in the first regional elections via indirect suffrage. The ruling party, Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, wins without opposition in the Anglophone regions and controls seven of the eight Francophone ones. Separatists reject decentralisation and Special Status. They threaten officials associated with them.

7 December 2021

Armed separatists kidnap Fon Kevin Shumetang II, vice president of the North West Regional Assembly and president of the House of Chiefs.

5 September 2021

Separatists launch a school boycott in the North West and South West regions. In response, government officials say they consider shutting down so-called community schools, which volunteers run in separatist-controlled areas.

20 January 2023

Canada's foreign minister, Mélanie Joly, announces an agreement for talks between Cameroonian officials and separatist leaders following meetings the preceding November and December. Anglophone leaders agree to commit to the mediation.

23 January 2023

Cameroon publicly rejects Canada's organising of talks.

Appendix E: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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