

The Northwestern and Southwestern Cameroon War of Secession: A Descent to Terrorism?

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ABSTRACT:

Adopting a survey methodology, this research delves into the activities of the so-called 'Ambazonia' separatists in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon. Employing structured questionnaires and key informant interviews, the study investigates communication strategies, recruitment methods, territorial control, and alleged criminal activities by the separatists. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research seeks to provide evidence for an informed conclusion on whether the separatist activities align with a genuine liberation war or exhibit a shift towards terrorism. Findings suggest compelling indications of the latter, prompting reflection on the profound human cost of the conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In a region at the Western part of Cameroon and bordering the Southeastern extremity of Nigeria, a separatist war by the so-called 'Ambazonian' rebels against the government of Cameroon appears to be drifting towards terrorism. Evidenced by spates of indiscriminate and extrajudicial killings¹ among other atrocious acts, what grew from a legitimate call through street protests for inclusive governance to a separatist movement following the killing of protesters by the Cameroonian government is now hardly qualifiable as a legitimate demand (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The Anglophone conflict began because of the violent crackdown by Cameroonian authorities on protests against marginalization of the English-speaking part of the country (the Northwest and Southwest regions) in 2017. The conflict has since escalated into a full-blown war of secession in which both the rebels and the Cameroonian forces have suffered significant losses. With the rebels employing unconventional and unlawful measures in their fighting, this study

¹ Extrajudicial Killings: https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231011-cameroun-l-ex%C3%A9cution-publique-de-2-civils-dans-le-nord-ouest-assum%C3%A9e-par-un-groupe-s%C3%A9paratiste?fbclid=IwAR2mjbmHD66lqbsBz3DZFhveYyvpUr5Db5ko9NmEN19nr5V0kLxBFUf_6_o

examines whether their actions have now evolved into terrorism or at least teetering into terrorism.

The popularity of the separatist movement at its inception notwithstanding, the Ambazonia fighters, or some groups under the Ambazonia banner seem to have transformed into some kind of terrorists prompting some to even refer to them as terrorist organisations.

Such a development is hardly surprising given that the West African subregion has over the last fifteen years witnessed an upsurge of terror organisations. Some of these organisations, however, often sprang up with some form of grievance over resource allocation or political agenda before veering off course and descending into crimes.

In Nigeria, Chad Republic and Niger Republic, the Boko Haram terrorist group has unleashed mayhem on members of community while in Mali, the al-Qaeda linked Jamaat Nusrat-al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and others have been very active. These organisations have seen the capacity of government forces stretched like never before in a bid to contain their activities. In Chad, the president was even killed in combat against terrorists.

Whether the West African region can afford to engage terrorists on another front especially with the exit of French forces remains to be seen. France, a former colonial power has wielded significant influence in West Africa. However, growing resentment against French policy towards former colonies has forced the exit of its forces in Mali, Niger among others.

Part of this terror-affected region, in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, one group among others observed to promote violence against innocent civilians is the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC) and this study aims at determining whether this now constitute terrorism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To determine whether the separatist's tactics are legitimate or whether they have tilted towards terror, the research will seek to answer the following questions:

- What motivates individuals to join separatist movements in the Anglophone regions, and how do these groups recruit and radicalize new members?

- Do the separatist leaders demonstrate sufficient interest in a political resolution of the conflict?
- Given that the rebels now wield significant administrative control in the conflict area, are there programmes to solve the present needs of the population and plans for post-war development?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

In view of research questions, the following objectives come into focus:

- To examine motivations and recruitment strategies:
Investigate the underlying motivations that drive individuals to join separatist movements in the Anglophone regions. Analyse the recruitment and radicalization strategies employed by these groups to attract new members.
- To evaluate interest in a political resolution:
Assess the level of commitment demonstrated by separatist leaders in seeking a political resolution to the conflict. Examine their engagement in diplomatic efforts and negotiations aimed at resolving the Anglophone crisis.
- To analyse rebel administrative control and development initiatives:
Investigate the extent of administrative control wielded by separatist rebels in the conflict area. Explore existing programs aimed at addressing the immediate needs of the population under their control and assess the presence of post-war development plans.

STUDY AREA

The study area encompasses the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. These include the Northwestern Region and Southwestern Region where a protracted conflict ongoing, challenging the socio-political landscape (See Fig. 1). Historically part of Nigeria, these regions opted to join Cameroon through a controversial plebiscite on 11 February, 1961 (Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjor, 1997). In recent years, tensions between the Anglophone minority and Francophone majority have escalated into a complex armed conflict.

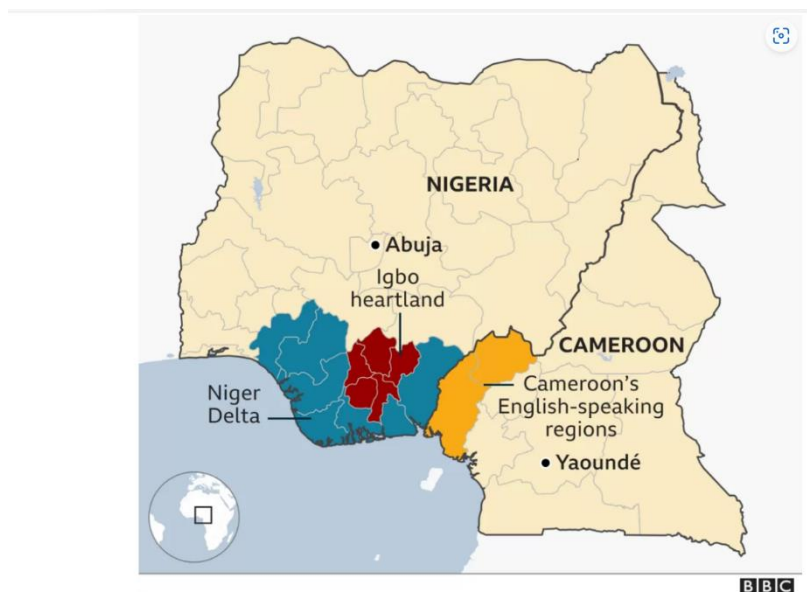


Fig. 1 Map showing Cameroon's English-speaking regions.

Source: BBC, 2021 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58726231>)

The conflict, often referred to as the "Northwest and Southwest Cameroon War of Secession," has witnessed the emergence of separatist movements seeking the creation of an independent state called "Ambazonia." The study delves into the complex socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics of this conflict, exploring its origins and evolution of the separatists' activities over the years.

The region's unique socio-cultural fabric, characterized by linguistic differences and historical grievances, has contributed to the development of distinct separatist ideologies. Armed groups, notably the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC), have gained prominence, attempting to carve out a separate identity.

The study aims to assess critical aspects of the conflict, including the motivations driving individuals to join separatist movements, the strategies employed in recruitment and radicalization, and the leadership's commitment to a political resolution.

Given the silence and prevailing fear in the region, the study seeks to shed light on the impact of intimidation on public discourse. The instillation of fear, ideological underpinnings, and the

potential metamorphosis of separatist movements into entities exhibiting characteristics of terrorism are central themes to be explored.

Incorporating insights from social media, historical context, and contemporary geopolitical realities, the study presents a comprehensive narrative of the Anglophone Cameroon conflict.

Significance of Study

➤ Examining the evolution of conflict dynamics:

The study allows for an in-depth analysis of how the conflict has evolved over time. This includes the progression from a secessionist movement to potentially adopting terrorist tactics. Examining this evolution is crucial for policymakers, security experts, and scholars to comprehend the changing nature of the conflict, enabling more informed decision-making and conflict resolution strategies.

➤ Assessing the impact on civilian populations:

Research on the descent to terrorism in the Northwest and Southwest Cameroon War is essential for evaluating the impact on civilian populations. This includes studying the humanitarian consequences, displacement, and human rights violations. Understanding the toll on communities provides insights into the urgent need for humanitarian interventions, peacebuilding efforts, and protection of vulnerable populations.

➤ Informing counterterrorism strategies:

The study has direct implications for counterterrorism efforts. By analysing whether the conflict has descended into terrorism, the research will inform policymakers and security agencies about the specific nature of the threats posed. This understanding is critical for developing targeted and effective counterterrorism strategies that address the unique challenges presented by the secessionist conflict. And to explore the dangerous potential of transnational cooperation between terrorist actors

Literature Review

Nyadera (2019) observed that after the first two years of the war, it became increasingly difficult for the external observer and non-combatants in the conflict-affected communities to

sustain any argument to justify the war. This appears to be so because of the many twists and turns in the crisis including allegations that the rebels have been indulging in criminality including kidnapping, summary executions, forms of extrajudicial killings and other atrocities against the same people they are supposedly fighting to liberate. Some observers have indicated that these activities bear the hallmarks of terrorism. There is even a tax regime parallel to that of the government imposed on the region whose people are already economically impoverished because of the prolonged war.

Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjor (2019) noted that the Cameroonian government having suffered significant setbacks in the fighting and largely lost control in the conflict area, there is a general sense of impunity by perpetrators of these alleged crimes while the ordinary community people continue to live in crippling fear. The atrocities often attributed to the rebels have caused such a hush-effect that hardly any anyone from the affected area is willing to engage in a conversation about the war, meanwhile, the war appears to be sustained by this very absence of discourse. As Vigh Henrik (2006) wrote of a similar situation in Guinea Bissau, if this was planned, then it appears the strategy has been largely successful. That success would give the indication that this is a coordinated situation rather than a random manifestation.

Mireille Manga Edimo (2021) listed a number of governments and transnational entities attempting to mediate a resolution of the crisis but efforts by foreign governments like those of Canada and Switzerland to mediate peace have stalled. The war rages on, and even worse, it is fast becoming a forgotten conflict while innocent civilians are left at the hands of merciless killers. For instance, in January 2023, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada, Melanie Joly unveiled Canada's roadmap and mandate to resolve the conflict, working with relevant parties (Melanie Joly, 2023). She even provided a list of parties to the conflict made up of the government of Cameroon and different separatist groups, stating their willingness to negotiate and openness to other parties joining. Since this declaration, no progress has been made and no other party has been added to that list. Maurice Beseng and Gordon Crawford *et al* (2023) hold that this is unsurprising as the separatist are largely divided and in bitter rivalry amongst themselves. This seeming lack of interest in a settlement despite the alleged atrocities and offers of other governments to mediate is a cause for concern.

This situation also necessitates investigation into whether this war is still a just and legitimate war, one that follows the rules of war, international law and conventions. Expressing this

concern, Maxwell Bone (2022) writes in the *New Humanitarian* on “Why the Spoils of War May Outweigh Incentives for Peace in Cameroon”. As a negotiated settlement remains elusive, the question arises whether the approaches and conduct of rebel leaders and their groups such as the so called Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC) and the Interim Government (IG) in the war are permissible in law, or whether those activities now constitute terrorism. How the rebels evolved from a point of widespread public sympathy and support of the population to a point where their own people consider them pariahs, outlaws, and even savage terrorists is an important point for consideration. Equally important is the rhetoric with which the largely offshore-based leadership feeds their loyalists on the ground. If this includes hateful and extreme content, then it will be an important element in qualifying the separatists as extremists/terrorists.

Establishing these facts is not only vital for defining the groups but also to how the affected governments and the international community respond to the situation. It is important to know what worldview the rebels or terrorists are typically fighting with especially when they carry such alleged atrocious acts that are now viewed by some as acts of terrorism. Is their worldview the extreme rhetoric fed to them by their leaders who are mainly residing abroad? Or are they prompted merely by the availability of arms within the conflict-affected area and the wider region? Is it a combination of these factors? Answering these questions will help governments and other stakeholders to deal with the individuals at a post-conflict stage of the crisis.

Furthermore, the groups continue to show a determination to bolster their political and territorial positions through a raft of strategic moves which appear aimed at giving them a legitimate outlook. One of these is a set of two alliances signed by the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which is a separatist group in Nigeria. In February 2022, the two groups formally established bilateral relations and in October 2023 they signed the ‘Defence Alliance’ and established the ‘Joint International Council’ in Helsinki, Finland. This was built upon what the groups described as a foundational Memorandum of Understanding in October 2020. Writing on this, Maria Ketzmerick (2022:18) suggested there could be legal and security implications of non-state treaties such as these and that the Nigerian and Cameroonian secessionists pact compounds the tasks of both countries’ security operations in the Gulf of Guinea. Nyedera Israel (2019) noted that quite obviously, like Islamic State and the Taliban, there appears to be a budding terror network with territorial claims normally reserved for a sovereign state.

In the wake of these groups' surge, stratagem and power plays, assessing where the treaties signed by rebel entities in the two countries stand in the eyes of their respective national laws and international law is a national security issue. This has significant impact on the civilian population especially at the border region.

Unlike the 2020 accord which happened in secrecy, the October 2023 treaties signed in Helsinki, Finland were openly celebrated by the so-called prime minister of Biafra and his Cameroonian counterpart. This suggests the increasing boldness of the groups. It is noteworthy that the government of Finland has neither issued a condemnation for the event taking place in its territory nor ordered any investigation to the matter. It raises the question whether the silence by the Finish government can be construed as some kind of indirect recognition of the so-called Biafra Republic and Ambazonia Republic which these groups seek to carve out of Nigeria and Cameroon respectively.

At this stage it is worth noting that the two groups are already so powerful in their respective domains of operation as to successfully pass sit-at-home orders in their communities. On Mondays, IPOB enforces the 'sit at home' order in five states within their stronghold in the Southeast zone of Nigeria, while the Ambazonia rebels enforce the 'ghost town' order in their self-declared territory. Both 'sit at home' and 'ghost town' orders are a form of (forced) civil disobedience aimed at embarrassing the governments they are fighting against. In light of the total success in enforcing these orders, it appears these treaties earlier mentioned further enhance their standing locally and in the global stage.

Also, this strategic manoeuvre for clout and authority further emboldens the rebels to upset the already fragile security in the Gulf of Guinea and enable them to command more respect amongst the people and communities they control. For these ordinary people, it comes with complexities regarding which entity to recognize as government seeing that the rebels can neatly enforce civil disobedience, withstand government's military response (in terms of the Cameroonian separatists) and control swathe of territory. Moreover, for a different context to the level of influence of these groups, in the separatist region of Cameroon (the so called Ambazonia) for instance, there is even a tax regime called the Liberation Tax (against government policy) imposed by AGovC on the region whose people are already economically impoverished because of the prolonged war.

While in Cameroon the Anglophone conflict began following the violent crackdown by Cameroonian authorities on protests marginalization of Anglophone part of the country (Northwest and Southwest) in 2017, the Biafra separatists in Nigeria have long sort an independent state, a quest that resulted in civil war between 1967-1970.

Some of the rebel leaders in both countries are being incarcerated while as mentioned, in Cameroon, efforts by foreign governments like those of Canada and Switzerland to mediate peace have largely stalled. This, and recent moves by the groups further complicates the issue of qualification of the separatist activities whether as a legitimate cause or terrorism and where it leads in terms of national laws, international law, and regional security.

Njor Takon has argued that the treaty which AGovC has signed with IPOB – proscribed organisation – is just the same as the kind of terrorist alliances in which smaller terrorist organisations pledge allegiance to bigger ones like Al-Qaeda, Islamic State and the Taliban among others. This marks the budding of a much wider terror network in the southern parts of Nigeria and Cameroon. Whatever the assessment, for AGovC and IPOB, this alliance had immediate impact of which both groups claimed to have killed Nigerian forces in the ceded Bakassi peninsula. The wider implications of this alliance in the short term and long term are what the affected states and entire West African region must worry about and contain.

Recently, the BBC noted that the government of Ethiopia on the 1st of January 2024 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, a breakaway region of Somalia to the consternation of the Somali government². While Somalia is a recognized state with a legitimate government, Somaliland has not been recognized by any country even though operating like a sovereign state. This development has given credence to the kind of Ambazonia-Biafra alliance and given impetus to their activities. Like the so-called ‘Defence Alliance’ of AGovC-IPOB, much of the detail of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU is shrouded in secrecy³. Thus, in the eyes of the rebels at least, it demonstrates that an entity pretending to be a sovereign state has just as much standing as a legitimate state actor. This tends to give them the assumption of power and free reign, hence the allegation of atrocities being carried out.

² Ethiopia Signs MoU with unrecognised Somaliland: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67911057>

³ AGovC-IPOB alliance signing: <https://fb.watch/olCyyvxcuK/?mibextid=6aamW6>

Whether this reign is within permissible norms and conventions or whether it has tilted over to a reign of terror is the big issue.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this research is the survey research design.

Methods of Data Collection

Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire was developed to sample opinion on the approach of the Ambazonia separatists. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions to gather qualitative data. The survey covered areas such as the separatists' communication in the media, method of recruitment, territorial control, and alleged criminal activities by the separatist groups.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders, including community leaders, representatives of local and international non-governmental organisations. These interviews provided insights into the perception held about the separatists.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the research are structured into the following key headings:

The communication element

It was revealed that one angle from which to assess whether the separatists are still on course as legitimate freedom fighters or whether they have veered off to terrorism is their use of propaganda and its role in the persistence of the war and the atrocities being carried out. How these groups recruit their membership is important as it highlights the motivating factor for the new intake. This draws into analysis the style of communication which is increasingly being compared to that of typical terror organisations. Those who make this comparison maintain that the war crimes, and human rights violations in Anglophone Cameroon persist mainly because of propaganda, culture-based extreme rhetoric and other types of communication (especially through new media). They also observe that the conduct of the groups strips them of any moral or political legitimacy hence, no more justification for the war. Other than

promoting hate and extreme rhetoric to achieve narrow agendas, the rebels no longer have anything to say to the people. They have lost the narrative.

It has been observed that two years into the war, it became increasingly difficult for the external observer to sustain any argument for the war. This corroborates the argument that the fighting has lost its purpose. The rebels seemed to have derailed from the focus of the independence movement, engaging more and more in criminal activities and human rights violation than exploring ways to conclude the war. It becomes even more strange that most of the alleged atrocities are committed against the same people they are supposedly fighting for. Viewed from this perspective, the rebels' recent conduct tends to point to terrorism and the tax regime which is parallel to that of the government imposed on their people bears the hallmark of the strategy employed by ISIS (Bandula-Irwin and Max Gullien *et al* 2022). Those outside the conflict area (mostly in Europe and North America) who feel safe enough to speak against these entities maintain that only heartless terrorists will add a tax burden on their own people who are already economically impoverished because of the prolonged war. The obvious benefit of taxation to the groups should leave little question as to why they repeatedly resist efforts by peace mediators. Those efforts having stalled, the war rages on and, even worse it would be highly advantageous to the terrorists for the conflict to be a forgotten one.

Therefore, in assessing whether these activities amount to terrorism, it is useful to investigate what motivates the rebels to fight on, despite indications and criticisms that the fighting so far has achieved nothing and is likely to achieve little with the rebels having lost considerable legitimacy and support for the war. Rather than a coherent nationalist messaging, what tends to inspire their fighters in recent times is hate for the French-speaking Cameroonians, and their fellow English-speaking 'Ambazonians' who oppose their views. This tool seems so successful that rather than their membership dwindling, it is swelling with members who stand ready to carry out any orders by their leaders. There have been horrible sights of public executions of alleged saboteurs or 'black legs' on the orders of their offshore leadership. That success means the foreign-based leaders are constantly on the media inciting their followers to violence much the same as the leaders of more established terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda, Islamic State and others can influence the conduct of their followers from anywhere. In an assessment of 20 randomly selected social media groups of these organisations, it was observed that 80% of these consistently contained themes which tend to be packaged as motivation for new members and the rest of the groups. Such themes included propaganda-style

communication and a systematic and sustained radicalization (Christian P. Musah, 2022). These forms of communication have served to inflame the conflict, introducing most of the terrorist conduct into the mix even though some of the initial fighting was reactionary following for example, the 2017 crackdown on protesters.

Arms Proliferation in the region:

The findings indicate that success of the communication tool seems to be bolstered by the proliferation of arms within the conflict-affected area and the wider region, enabling criminal operations in the cover of liberation war. Considered from this prism, the argument that there is no longer a pure and valid sociopolitical and/or socioeconomic justification for continuing the war may be understood. What seems to be going on now appears to be a pure terror enterprise.

Here the assessment is on whether the war persists purely because of political reasons or whether it is now being sustained by hate and extremism and the flow of arms. For instance, because rebel leaders mostly reside abroad, fighters on the ground with easy access to arms have become largely out of control. With arms, it is easy for them to express their hate.

Viewed from this point, the link between leadership vacuum and the acts carried out using these weapons as well as the link between the nature of communication by the leadership and those acts becomes obvious. Either way, data from the randomly selected message threads of the rebel leadership show a correlation between the message themes and the activities of fighters on the ground which bear semblance of terror. The impact is the said kidnappings, theft, extortion, extrajudicial killings and human rights violation. The Cameroonian government having suffered significant setbacks in the fighting and largely lost governance in the area, there is general sense of impunity by perpetrators while the ordinary community people continue to live in crippling fear. The overarching question by the ordinary inhabitants in the area remains what the point is for the fighting since the initial political consensus has largely fizzled.

Lack of Discourse/Narrative on the Conflict:

In some ways, silence has also catalysed the war. The intimidation and the lack of capacity of state institutions to protect non-state actors means there is inadequate public discourse on the

issue. There is so much fear of repercussion that no one is willing to engage on the issue. This has created an environment in which only the rebels control the narrative with the attending impacts as described. The focus here is to test whether the limited discourse from different important angles results from the terror approaches by the rebels to intimidate and silence people and groups opposed to ideology. Viewed from any perspective, this has emerged as an important factor in the persistence of the war.

Typically, for a conflict like this, sources of conversation would among others be the international community, the victims of the war, and the parties to the armed conflict. It seems therefore, that the international community has failed to exert enough pressure for the parties to come to a peaceful resolution just as victims themselves are unable to voice out their suffering due to intimidation and fear of repercussion. It has been observed that people from this area have become too afraid and unwilling to talk about the war and the issues going on. The fear in them becomes evident when one attempts to start a conversation about the fighting. It suggests that the parties to the conflict so far have managed to systematically keep the world's attention away from the war and the atrocities committed in its wake. Owing to this silence there is a general sense of impunity by perpetrators while the ordinary community people continue to live in fear.

Establishment of an Ideology:

Cho Lucas Ayaba and his AGovC group under the cover of a liberation war appear to be promoting a bloody ideology in which they believe violence is the ultimate approach to achieving their stated aim of independence of 'Ambazonia'. Cho Lucas Ayaba has been seen in videos in which he espouses violence as an effective weapon against the enemy, recounting his experience and how he arrived at the decision to use violence⁴. The social media is awash with such promotional materials serving as a major tool for recruitment which they call the "draft". This adherence to an ideology is also a critical element in the makeup of a terror organisation. Owing to the devastation caused by the war, the ranks of this groups are swelling by the day. Young men are joining in droves. These are the people who would have helped to build their society but whose dreams have been cut short and who now consider joining the separatists as

⁴ Cho Lucas Ayaba endorsing violence: <https://fb.watch/otNo0JUbnl/?mibextid=KtfwRi>

the only sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfilment. Answering the radicalization messaging and the call to arms, for the young men, is even beyond personal ambition, it is selfless service to the fatherland. It is exactly how Ayaba Cho and his cohorts want it.

While in northern Nigeria the impoverishment of the young people from an early age through religion has long been a tool for grooming future terrorists, in the emerging scenario in the Anglophone crisis, the strategy for sustaining membership appears to be purely economic devastation and media messaging.

Across the world, religion has often been used by terrorist cells to set up the us versus them agenda but with the markedly different socio-cultural environment in this area, the strategy for vilification is also different. Here, the rallying call is language, and the extremist groups among the separatists tend to be working hard to label the French-speaking Cameroonian as the enemy. Due to the difficulty in sustaining an argument for the war, language politics tends to be the easy tool. With language politics, it is much easier to present the dominance of French-speaking community as the sole agency for the impoverishment of the English-speaking regions of the country.

With such a picture, French-speaking Cameroonians are widely perceived as being tasked with responsibility of keeping English speakers out of the political centre. Even though they cast this picture as a historical development within Cameroon, it ties in neatly with the general resentment against French presence in West Africa in recent years. As the French forces exit the region, it creates a more porous security environment in which terrorism is bound to thrive.

However, this is not the concern of the separatist whose sole focus appears to be the entrenchment of their extremist ideology. That mindset can sometimes be seen in their glee and glorification of killings and suffering meted to their perceived enemy. It is telling that both within and outside the conflict area, some people already refer to them as 'Amba terrorists'.

The Instillation of Fear on the Population:

Of itself, the level of fear instilled in the people is an important factor in determining whether the activities of this groups now amount to terrorism. Due to the level of violence, especially the execution-style killings and targeting of families accused of sabotage, there is so much fear that people are unwilling to talk, whether openly or in secret about the war. The ideology of hate is so entrenched that there is little trust for anyone. If terrorism is about intimidation and instillation of fear, then these organisations now bear the hallmarks of terrorism. Rather than

being seen as liberators, the separatists are now largely seen as the enemy due to their violent style and approach.

A common pretext in which the said atrocities and human rights are being violated is the declaration of perceived opponents to their ideology as 'black legs' or traitors. Those declared as such suffer several consequences including death at the hands of the ideologues.

It is important to know how there could have been such silence on the war and how the rebels managed to create an atmosphere of silence on issues as serious as the crimes being committed. Whatever the strategy employed to create this silence, what is clear is that the hush-effect has among other things, helped illegal arms trade to go under the radar, and aided arms proliferation in the region which bolster the rebels' capacity to sustain fighting. Even the relevant state authorities fail to pick up the cues in the silence through security intelligence and other investigatory techniques to restore law and order and bring criminals to justice.

Separatists Entities Acting like a State:

It would not be unusual for a legitimate organisation or movement to metamorphose into a criminal or even terrorist entity. Many examples abound in Africa like the Janjaweed militia in Sudan and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. In fact, it has been alleged that the vicious Boko Haram organisation that continues to ravage Northern Nigeria which also borders the area under study is a rogue political organisation. Some, like the Islamic State (which has now been neutralized) and the Taliban which now governs Afghanistan even take on a form of statehood or state institution, unleashing terror on inhabitants within their domain of control. Considering its activities, the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC) now appears to bear much of these characteristics. Amongst the different groups fighting for the establishment of the so-called Ambazonia, AgovC stands out for its boldness to openly own up to the violence it perpetrates, its lack of remorse and sympathy, and promotion of violence as a tool to realize its objectives is shocking.

The Joint International Council established, and the 'Defence Alliance' signed with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) will also potentially widen their field of operation substantially. These pacts have other implications like drawing into question Nigeria and Cameroon governments' ability to control movements in and out of its territory. Such cross-border movements had been a significant challenge for the Nigerian and Cameroonian

governments even before the crisis. The ‘treaties’ signed by the rebels adds several layers of difficulty to the problem. With little government control, smuggling and other crimes are likely to continue, further creating an environment in which terrorism will flourish. As Ayaba Cho, the president of AGovC has often been praised for his strategic thinking, birthing these pacts would have been carefully thought out and considered critical to his goal, whatever that is, be it terror or independence.

Given the territory’s history as part of Nigeria before it chose in a controversial plebiscite to join Cameroon, some commentators in Nigeria and Cameroon view the treaties as an effort towards reunification. However, such a reunification is not seen to be with the Nigerian state but with the separatist region of Biafra. In the words of Jean Mbaga and Zachée (2019) “the brutal physical abuse of civilian populations by soldiers stationed in the area exacerbated the commitment to splitting from Francophone Cameroon and forming a prosperous oil rich State in the image of an aborted Biafra”.

Invoking History as a Strategy:

An alliance such as that signed by AGovC and IPOB is not entirely new. It seems to have been built on the heels of the regional politics that prevailed during the previous union. At that time, politics in what was eastern Nigeria was dominated by the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). This was the political party that dominated Eastern Nigeria politics, ‘Cameroons’ in its name being the present-day conflict-affected Northwestern and Southwestern Cameroon. Hence these treaties tend to revive the old sentiment (Kwabena Simpeh, Samuel Owusu-Ansah *et al*, 2019) that the people on both sides of the Nigeria-Cameroon southern border are one indivisible people who must now pursue their common destiny.

This treaty therefore raises fundamental questions that border on leadership, legitimacy, diplomacy, and legality. It seems like whatever goal these entities fail to achieve through their pact in the aspect of legality, they have achieved that on the emotional level (that is, the sentiments the alliance evokes), and if they fail emotionally, they have certainly achieved that goal in the history they have invoked.

According to an article by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the impact of this is that it has given rise to voices calling for the unification of the region into a new, larger state,

citing both the historical fact and the new treaty. Within the conflict-affected area, it has led some to call into question the integrity of the separatist organisations, particularly the AGovC and the wisdom of its leader Cho Lukas Ayaba and others. They point to them as terrorists, citing the alliance with IPOB – a proscribed organisation in Nigeria. In terms of public perception, the separatists now seem caught in the middle. At worst, on the one hand, they are viewed as having terrorist intent to destabilize the communities to maintain their criminal enterprise and at best they are considered moles planted by the Cameroon government to delegitimize, discredit, derail and neutralize the so-called Ambazonia revolution. On the other hand, the Cameroon government also points to the separatist's alliance with IPOB as proof that these are not freedom fighters but terrorists. This also raises the question whether the ongoing war is a legitimate one or terrorism unfolding.

Issues of Law, Security, and Identity:

Legally, the treaties could have implications both on the national laws of Nigeria and Cameroon and international law. Among several issues it raises, the once contentious issue of the oil rich Bakassi peninsula comes into the picture. Following an unsuccessful case at the International Court of Justice in 2002, Nigeria ceded to Cameroon this portion of its territory which now forms part of 'Ambazonia'. If these treaties bring Bakassi back within the sphere of influence of Biafra, then it has the potential of bringing the oil rich peninsula back into the orbit of Nigeria since Biafra remains part of the Nigerian state. The status of this groups does not seem to be much different to that of the precolonial local chiefs and kings in the area on whose treaties with Britain the court relied on for its judgement in favour of Cameroon.

Thus, emotionally, the AGovC-IPOB alliance fans the nationalist sentiment that existed before the accession into Cameroon, historically, it revives the old ties between the people, and legally, it potentially drives a wedge between Nigeria and Cameroon with all the security and diplomatic risks that come with it.

Whatever the analysis, one immediate impact is that this alliance adds to the spate of terrorism in Nigeria and Cameroon and is bound to create an environment in which other terrorist organisations will thrive.

Fragmentation of the Rebel Front

Meanwhile in Nigeria just as in Cameroon, individuals in the affected communities are resistant to the idea of a cross-border movement of fighters for both political and security reasons.

Politically, as mentioned, they see a union of the two regions as an old political construction that never worked, which cannot work, and which should remain consigned to history. In terms of security, the reputation of both IPOB and AGovC makes the prospect of these groups having a free reign across the territories unbearable for many. They see a risk of home-grown terrorism which could destabilize southern parts of the two countries that have been relatively free from the wave of terrorism sweeping through Sub-Saharan Africa especially the Sahel region. The alliance has brought such panic that it has led some to openly distance themselves from the activities and ideas of the two groups. Those public disavowal follows the lack of response from governments of both countries. Declarations like this come, not only out of concern over the emergence of terror but also about what government's eventual response might possibly be. There is concern that innocent population could be victims of a possible military action in the region to curtail the separatists. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, the region bordering the conflict area of Cameroon is one of a small number of areas that have not been completely taken over by insecurity like the rest of the country with issues ranging from terrorism, herdsmen crises to kidnappings. The people are concerned that their relatively peaceful communities which have hardly seen widespread conflict are now being put at risks by the separatist pacts.

This notwithstanding, there is also support for the unification of the regions. Groups in support see the two separatist regions as marginalized by their respective countries, thus making the creation of a political or diplomatic system that caters to their common problems necessary.

Such declarations of resistance and alliances by groups and clans have led to further fragmentation of the communities. Some of these groups and clans are not geographically confined to either Nigeria or Cameroon in terms of boundaries, rather, they cut across both countries. There are families and clans now claiming their mandate to govern varying territories in the area with some of these territories cutting across the two countries (Michael Bonchuk, (ND)). This creates problems of identity for the ordinary populations within those areas.

Furthermore, the lack of cohesion and a uniform agenda has given rise to several organisation which have very little, if anything, to do with the fight for independence other than using the mantra of independence as cover to perpetrate their terror objectives (Maurice Beseng Gordon Crawford and Nancy Annan 2023).

Bolstered by Technology

In the age of social media, the leverage technology affords the separatists' strategy cannot be overlooked. Technology has amplified the media content produced by these extremist groups

so much that it gets to their target audience with little effort. A significant part of that success is due to artificial intelligence (AI) which has defined digital technology in the last decade.

Artificial intelligence has proven to be a gamechanger in the digital technology domain. Its usefulness in fields like content automation in media, robotics in engineering, pattern recognition in medicine and other use cases cannot be overemphasized.

However, the growing sophistication and expanding fields of application of AI means that, like any other innovations, it can also become a tool in the hands of extremist for causing harm.

In an era that is seeing an increase in fascist propaganda, rise of populists to power, establishment of authoritarian regimes, and emergence of extremist ideologies, the media space has become an attractive space for waging warfare through 'fake news' and disinformation. The UK's Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit in a comprehensive assessment recently found the same trend⁵. Armed by generative artificial intelligence (AI) for instance, these antithetical forces more than ever before, can incite violence faster, instigate larger crises, and steer the course of crises more precisely.

Thus, in the Anglophone crisis, the media has become an important domain for waging war. Here, the separatists can steer the narrative in their own favour, easily spreading their ideology and recruiting new members into their ranks. Despite their loss of credibility and increasing drift to criminality, separatist leaders are unrelenting in their attempts to steer the course of the floundering war in their favour by pushing false narratives and claims against the Nigerian and Cameroon states and worst still, against members of their own community opposed to their ideology.

Observations of the capability of a technology like generative AI indicates that its use in the media can transform little effort by even small adversaries like the 'Ambazonia' separatists into monumental social disasters capable of engulfing entire regions. This appears to be the unfolding reality in the Nigeria-Cameroon southern border. The media output by these rebel entities indicates that they understand this more than the enemy they are engaging and have so far used technology to their advantage.

Summary:

⁵ UK's Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit report: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-67884785>

The study began with a historical picture of the sociocultural and sociopolitical milieu of the area of study, putting this into context with the available literature. Adopting a survey research design, the research delved into the activities of the so-called Ambazonia separatists in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon. Through the deployment of structured questionnaires and key informant interviews, the investigation explored critical aspects such as communication strategies, recruitment methods, territorial control, and alleged criminal activities of the separatists.

The methodology was a mixed-method that aimed to furnish evidence for an informed conclusion regarding the nature of the separatist activities. The findings, emerging from this comprehensive analysis, presented compelling discourse that the unfolding events in the region now indicate characteristics more aligned with acts of terrorism than a genuine liberation war. This revelation prompts a crucial reflection on the incalculable human cost of the ongoing conflict. It also underscored the urgency of a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon.

CONCLUSION:

The assessment provides evidence for the inquirer or analyst to make their own conclusion based on the facts as to whether the separatist activities remain on course as a genuine war of liberation or whether there is a gradual drift or a complete shift towards terrorism. The evidence here suggests that both arguments cannot be equally valid because there appear strong indications that what is unfolding in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon is more akin to acts of terror than a liberation fight. Whatever one's conclusion though, the most important question should remain: would the endgame be worth this bloodshed?

RECOMMENDATION:

Based on the research findings, the following is recommended

International Mediation and Diplomacy:

Given the indication of a potential shift towards terrorism, it is recommended to intensify international efforts for mediation and diplomacy. Engage relevant international bodies, such as the United Nations and regional organizations, to foster dialogues and negotiations. A concerted diplomatic approach may help address the root causes of the conflict and promote a peaceful resolution.

Humanitarian Intervention and Assistance:

Acknowledging the profound human cost of the conflict, there should be a concerted effort to provide humanitarian assistance to affected populations. Collaborate with international humanitarian organizations to ensure the delivery of aid, including medical support, food, and shelter, to those affected by the conflict. This can help mitigate the immediate impact on civilians and build goodwill within the communities.

Counterterrorism Collaboration:

Recognizing the potential shift towards terrorism, it is essential to enhance collaboration in counterterrorism efforts. Facilitate information-sharing and intelligence cooperation with international partners to address the alleged criminal activities associated with the separatist groups. This collaborative approach can contribute to dismantling illicit networks and preventing further escalation.

Community Engagement and Dialogue:

Initiate community-level engagement and dialogue programs to foster understanding and unity within the affected regions. Promote open discussions on the aspirations of the separatist groups, addressing grievances through peaceful means. Community involvement can help counter the recruitment narrative of the separatists and build resilience against extremist ideologies.

These recommendations aim to address the multifaceted aspects of the conflict, ranging from diplomatic solutions to on-the-ground humanitarian support and counterterrorism measures. Implementing a holistic approach involving various stakeholders will be crucial in achieving a sustainable and peaceful resolution to the complex situation in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon.

REFERENCES