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Protest March Restrictions in Cameroon

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Abstract

Southern Cameroonians stage protest marches because of their low or negative social status identity comparative to their French-speaking compatriot. This produces a negative perception of themselves: that of a marginalized people which is a negative or a low social identity. Accordingly, they try to change this situation by mobilizing their members for a protest march as it was on the 22nd September and 1st October, 2017 and their clamor for absolute independence is much clearer today than before. They have therefore constructed a collective identity with a common goal and an emotional bond of organizing protest marches, lockdowns and executing the weekly ghost towns among other. The shared goal of the Anglophone is different from that of the Francophone while one is protesting against the form of state and the protection of their English culture, the other is protesting against a change of government or better governance. In each protest, law enforcement officers brutalized, injured, harassed, seized and destroyed their phones, barred some from joining the demonstrations and dispersed them ruthlessly by violently repressing them, using teargas as well as shooting live bullets on the crowds. While southern Cameroonians share a collective identity and massively organize protest marches, their French-speaking compatriots have conflicting interests and low protest march participation.

Keywords: Protest March, social status, repression, independence, Ambazonia, collective identity, Anti-terrorism law

1. Introduction

Since 2016 the government of Cameroon has been doing everything to stop any collective action organized by the population in the English-speaking part of the country to denounce their marginalization by sending security forces to roughly brutalize the population in order to discourage protest march. Lawyers and teachers in Southern Cameroon went on strike in 2016 and they were later on joined by the general public. The call by asking for a federation in which the Anglophone could manage their own affairs, a situation which existed before the referendum in 1972 later on turned into a call for independence. Equally, in French-speaking Cameroon, the government too have done everything to quell protest march against electoral frauds and the departure of the government which has been ruling for over 38 years and which is doing everything to maintain itself in power. In Cameroon, there are two groups of people with distinct colonial heritage: the Anglophone in the minority are dissatisfied with their relation with their French-speaking brothers and want total freedom while the French-speaking citizens are protesting for better governance and a change of system.

All these as [1] puts it, is a mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions, characterized by showmanship or display of an unconventional nature, and undertaken to obtain rewards from political or economic systems while working within the system. Equally, [2] states that, a protest act includes the following elements: the action expresses a grievance, a conviction of wrong or injustice; the protesters are unable to correct the condition directly by their own efforts; the action is intended to draw attention to the grievances; the action is further meant to provoke ameliorative steps by some target group; and the protestors depend upon some combination of sympathy and fear to move the target group in their behalf”.

A protest group is, by definition, a collectivity of actors who want to achieve their shared goal or goals by influencing decisions of a target group. In our case the protest group is either the Anglophones who are fighting for secession because they have been marginalized for over 50 years or the French-speaking Cameroonians who are protesting to kick out a system that has been in power for over 38 years. In this case, the shared goal of the Anglophone is different from that of the Francophone while one is protesting against a change of state, the other is protesting against a change of government. Does this differing shared goals and collective identity affect their various mobilization and collective action? Our objective is to examine how protest marches in both the English-speaking and French-speaking parts of Cameroon differ.

It is worth-noting that article 11 of [3] states that everyone has the right to associate with others and gather together for a common purpose and it stresses that it is fundamental for people to be free. People must protest peacefully, join trade unions and hold the powerful to account. People have the right to come together with others and peacefully share their views. Authorities must allow people to take part in marches, protests and demonstrations. There is the freedom of expression as it applies to protests, marches and demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, press conferences, public and private meetings but it does not protect intentionally violent protest. However, this right is limited if it is covered by law, for the interest of national security or public safety, prevention of crimes or disorder, the protection of health or morals and the protection of others’ rights and freedoms.

The article clearly states that the state should not interfere with people’s right to protest just because it disagrees with protesters’ views, because it’s likely to be inconvenient and cause a nuisance or because there might be tension and heated exchange between opposing groups. Instead it must take reasonable steps to enable people protest and to protect participants in peaceful demonstrations from disruption by others. Contrarily in Cameroon, the government thinks that protest marches will affect the integrity of the state and style protesters as terrorists. The questions we ask are: How does the government of Cameroon restrict the protest marches of protesters? How do the protesters and the general public react to these restrictions? Our objective is to explain how human rights are abused in Cameroon through protest march restriction and how Cameroonians react to the restriction.

This work is divided into two distinct parts: part one concerns the protest march of secession demanded by the English-speaking (Southern Cameroon or Amnazonia) part of the country due to the French-speaking part dominance over them and the second part concerns the French-speaking part of the country which is protesting to overturn a system that has ruled the country for over 38 years.

2. Data collection and interpretation

We collected the qualitative data of acts of protest marches in English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroon from the Internet, using the accounts of seasoned

activists who had sent out numerous posts on different protest marches to their targeted population. Those posts are important textual material: videos, blog posts, comments, social networking posts which are all as [4] calls them, essential parts of the expanse of qualitative material online. Equally, [5, 6] considers them as “a new continent, rich in resources but in parts most perilous.” which had “lain undiscovered, unmined and uninhabited” for about 30 years.

Activists posted many materials online to keep their audiences abreast of the difficulties of organizing a protest march in Cameroon and to awaken their consciousness of the importance of protest marches to either secede from the country and restore their independence or to change the government that has been in power for over 38 years. Therefore Facebook was a fruitful site of the way as [7] puts it, hundreds of millions of Cameroonians and other nationals connect to one another and share protest march information: it provides an entirely preserved archive of data featuring, write-up, friends’ comments, pictures, about the protest marches in English and French speaking parts of Cameroon. We judged the information as a true reflection of participants’ minds, uses and behavior. Therefore, the participants were ‘doing’ things with their postings. As may be expected from our theoretical stance, our questions focused on how people talked and interacted on Facebook of events of protest marches in Cameroon. The symbols of the posts to the public drew our attention as well as the people’s reactions. We considered their comments in order to understand how both English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroonians differ in the appreciation of the posts of protest marches in Cameroon.

In this age of smartphones images or video-making is easy as most people even in the third world possess a smartphone with a built-in camera. They film relevant events in their daily lives: usually the remarkable, the extraordinary, the exceptional and not the ordinary or everyday activities [8]. We decided then to collect videos of protest marches in Cameroon in order to analyze them because they provide information that other types of data do not provide. They are ‘proofs of facts’ because a picture or video is more, and different, than a thousand words since they contain much more visual information on bodily movement and include acoustic data. Although images are specific reality constructions ambivalent, subjective and diffuse, their interpretation must be substantiated in words [9]. The questions we asked concerning each of the videos were similar to those asked by Becker, 1974 [10]: What are the acts of violence and human rights abuses in each video? How can they be interpreted and linked to our theoretical concept? What insight do they generate and substantiate? What different kinds of people are there? We link observations to theoretical concepts such as status, groups, norms, rules, and common understandings, deviance and rule violation, sanctions and conflict resolution.

3. Protest march restrictions in English-speaking Cameroon - Ambazonia

This part dwells on three main protests marches in Southern Cameroon, two of which triggered the Anglophone or Ambazonia crisis: the common lawyer and the university of Buea students’ strike. Both of them were clammed down by a heavy police force and the second was the 22nd September, 2017 massive and pervasive march protest that took place all over Ambazonia; it took the government off-guard.

The Southern Cameroon crisis is an Ambazonians’ attempt to break from the dominant Francophone cultural hegemony. La République du Cameroun has dominated and tried to absorb them into the broader Francophone cultural system since 1972 by silently destroying their dignity and statehood because they came into union with them from a weaker position: a numerically smaller population [11].

The relationship that exists between Southern Cameroon and La République du Cameroun is one of two people, two inheritances, and two divergent mentalities: one struggles for its liberation while the other suppresses and abuses its human rights or struggles to maintain control over it by using its mighty state military. They speak different languages with little or no rapprochement although they live in the same country [11].

3.1 The police and the Southern Cameroon common law lawyers confrontation

The protest which was led by Barrister Agbor Balla, Dr. Fontem Neba and Tassang Wilfred began on October 6, 2016 as a sit-down strike initiated by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), an organization consisting of lawyer and teacher trade unions from the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

According to Wikipedia 20 [12], the common lawyers of Anglophone Cameroon had written an appeal letter to the government complaining of the use of French at schools and courtrooms in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. Desirous to protect the English culture, they began a sit-down strike in all courtrooms on October 6, 2016. Peaceful marches began in the cities of Bamenda, Buea, and Limbe calling for the protection of the common law system in Anglophone Cameroon and the practice of the Common Law sub-system in Anglophone courts and not the Civil Law as the French-speaking magistrates were using in court. They equally asked for the creation of a common law school at the University of Bamenda and Buea.

In addition, Francophone occupied all the outstanding positions at the Supreme Court. Although Francophone had little or no knowledge in English and the Common Law, they were mostly magistrates and bailiffs in the Anglophone zone. As a result, Anglophones lawyers were disgruntled of the domination of the Civil Law to the detriment of the common law as if Cameroon was uniquely a Civil Law country. Equally, the Business law for Africa (OHADA) uniform acts, CEMAC code, and others were not translated into English because Francophone wanted to assimilate the Common Law sub-system.

In Africanews, Morning call 2016 [13], Barrister Bobga Harmony lamented that the government of Cameroon had completely ignored them which violated their right to self-determination. He said that “since 1972, they have been a progressive, an inexplicable, illegal and illegitimate erosion of the common law.” He regretted the Francophone gradual replacement of the Common Law with the French Civil law as if Anglophone “were a conquered people”. The lawyers had complained to competent authorities through writing for years before taking concrete actions in order not to be swallowed up by the dominant Francophone system. They held a Common Law conference on the 9th May 2015 which was followed by a 2nd conference in Buea where they made a declaration to reinforce their position.

Although they had sent a communiqué to the presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, nobody paid attention to them. The Minister of Justice insulted the Common Lawyers in the government newspaper: Cameroon Tribune instead of defending them. Having exhausted all negotiation with the executive and the legislature, they protested and insisted to talk only with the president of the Republic of Cameroon or his properly mandated agent. They had filed a petition to the National Assembly and the Senate and they were planning to file another petition to the constitutional council to determine the question of whether they had been any act of union between West Cameroon and East Cameroon. They equally planned to proceed to the following international jurisdiction: African Commission for Human and People’s Right, the Human Right Commission if the

government failed to listen to them. Bobga Harmony insisted “We are going to seize the international community because these are grave abuses of human rights. The international community cannot fold its arms and allow us to be brutalized in our land,” [14].

3.2 Molestation of lawyers

The government sent over 5000 troops to thwart the Anglophone crisis. The crisis was considered to be “a strong organized and well-coordinated violence from angry protesters and the government did not want to allow that part of the country to be destroyed and the protesters too said they would not stop protesting until the government solved their problems [15].

Policemen hit the ‘the men in uniform’: lawyers with their batons in Buea. The Special Rapid Response (ESIR), the police and gendarmerie locked down and monitored the entire city. There was also a heavy police presence to confront the demonstrators. The policemen demanded that the lawyers hand over their black robes to them [16].

The demonstration of lawyers in Buea in the Southwest region on the 10th November, 2016, met with heavy-handed police response. Law enforcement officers reportedly brutalized, ransacked the offices of lawyers, seized their wigs and gowns, injured and harassed many in their cars, seized and destroyed their phones, barred some from joining the demonstrations, raided hotels in search for them and harassed them (**Figures 1 and 2**).

A video [18] went viral showing how police brutalized lawyers and the commotion that took place in the Muea police station. It clearly shows a police officer pursuing a young lawyer, then another lawyer is pushed into the police station by yet another policeman. Another man in robe is brutalized and pushed out of the police station. The police hit another who falls down and his watch falls off but the police pull him up by dragging his coat. A policewoman encourages her colleagues to hit the lawyer by clearly articulating the phrase in French “frappe,” “frappez-lui” over and over.

The episodes of police brutality in Ambazonia were not limited to lawyers only; it extended to the University of Buea students as well as the general public. Police molested many and a lot of disturbing videos show armed police officers hitting or rolling them in water, invading students’ quarters and beating them [11].



Figure 1.
Confrontation between police and lawyers. Source: Cameroon online [17]: <http://www.cameroonconcordnews.com/category/news/page/373/>.



Figure 2.

Source: Cameroon online [17]: <http://www.cameroonconcordnews.com/category/news/page/373/>.

3.3 Police confrontation with students

Teachers and the general public joined the lawyers in the strike by vehemently opposing what they described as the “imposition of French at schools in Anglophone parts of the country.” Students either struggled on their own at school because even private schools teachers had deserted classroom in support of the public sector teachers and so many classrooms and schools across Ambazonia were empty. They did not want the government to continue sending teachers who spoke only in French or Pidgin English. Even students supported the strike action because they were unemployed after completing school. “For over fifty years Anglophone students have not been able to have a headway in Cameroon in most disciplines that bring about development: science and technology because the government has refused to train teachers for our schools,” declared Tassang Wilfred over Aljazeera (2016) [19].

The University of Buea strike pulled a mammoth crowd of students who came protesting in order to attract the attention of the authority of the university to their plights. One student carried a placard on which it reads: “enough is enough”. They had a variety of complaints: the non-payment of the 50,000frs CFA that the government had promised them, the cancellation of the 10,000frs CFA penalty fees for the late payment of school-fees, the payment of fees before being given a semester result and as it was the general cry with the secondary and high schools in the Anglophone zone, they also demanded the removal of French-speaking lecturers from the faculty of the university [19].

They stood firm in front of the Administrative Block in order to meet the Vice Chancellor to complain to her but instead security forces took her away and a huge number of security forces were sent to disperse the students. As they arrived, the students ran into different directions and the atmosphere became very tense and misty because the security officers had thrown teargas and fired gun-shots in the air. The students shouted “no violence” as they darted away for safety. Despite beating and arresting them, the spirit of the strike action was not dampened so the students left and marched into the street (**Figure 3**).

3.4 The Ambazonia massive and pervasive protest march

According to [20, 21] renewed mass protests broke out early morning on Sept. 22, (Friday) 1st October 2017, in major towns and villages across the North West and South West regions thereby intensifying the crisis. Close to 80,000 people of

demonstrators in across thirty Anglophone towns and communities (Bamenda, Buea, Kumba, Kumbo, Limbe, etc.) marched through the streets on Friday in protest against the continuous detention of some of the inhabitants of the regions and demanded their independence from French Cameroon as well as the release of Anglophone political prisoners, the departure of President Biya, the implementation of federalism, and secession. The demonstrations was at the time President Paul Biya was scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Paul Biya’s speech ended without mentioning the Anglophone crisis in his country. This infuriated some protesters who spoke to the media (**Figure 4**).

The demonstrations took off in Bamenda in the North-West Region on Friday morning by defying a ban on movement of persons imposed on Thursday night by the region’s Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique, following a bomb attack on Thursday that injured three police officers. Local media reported that security forces were stationed at vantage points in the town and the protesters peacefully waved banners with



Figure 3.
Protest march and mass arrest of students. SOURCE: CHRDA <https://www.chrda.org/torture-of-university-of-buea-students-2-years-after/>.



Figure 4.
The Ambazonia massive protest march [20].

inscriptions calling for the release of their compatriots and independence. The demonstration spread to Buea in the South-West Region where women spearheaded the march with hundreds behind them carrying leaves, tree branches and flags of the Cameroon separatist movement. The aggrieved population also took to the streets placards, whistles and flags of Southern Cameroons/Ambazonia; a country they clamor to create when they secede from the Republic of Cameroon. Protesters moved to public places, hoisting blue-white flags and seeking to meet with administrative and traditional authorities. It was the same scene in other towns like Fontem, Bafia, Kumba and Mamfe among others in the same region where separatists demanded independence from French Cameroon. The civil disobedience call was made by the Ambazonia Governing Council and amplified by Anglophone activists in the diaspora, as a build up to Oct. 1, the day the pro-secessionist groups intended to restore their independence (**Figure 5**).

Other Anglophone also protested at the UN headquarters in New York. According to [23], in the diaspora Southern Cameroonians took hostage the UN headquarters in their host countries. It was hot at the UN headquarters in New York where the two distinct peoples of Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroon challenged each other.

According to [24] the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon escalated on 1st October 2017, when militant secessionist groups symbolically proclaimed the independence of Ambazonia. Violence left dozens of protesters dead and over 100 injured. The event was to commemorate the 1961 reunification between the Cameroon under French mandate and the British Southern Cameroons.

On 1 October, tens of thousands of people began a peaceful march holding a plant symbolizing peace and chanting “no violence” to proclaim the independence of Ambazonia (the name given by secessionists to their hypothetical state. In Bamenda, Buea and across dozens of towns and communities, people marched and hoisted Ambazonian flags at intersections and on top the residences of traditional chiefs as well as at police stations and gendarmerie posts. Independence was symbolically proclaimed in chiefs’ compounds.

The march protest showed to the Biya’s regime that the Anglophone minority is a potential time bomb that will destroy national unity and reconciliation if the government failed to respect their cultural and linguistic traditional. Hon Joseph Wirba of the Jakiri Special Constituency while addressing his colleagues of the national assembly made it clear ‘when the people shall rise, even if you bring the whole of the French army and add to yours, you shall not be able to stop them.’



Figure 5.
Women leading the march [22].

3.5 Government's response

According to [20, 25] security forces responded with bullets and teargas, injuring some protesters in Santa and Ekona in the North West and South West Regions and arrested dozens of people. Government ordered the banning of all radio and television discussions on the political situation in the region. President Biya subsequently signed a decree establishing the National Commission of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism to solve the matter. In August 2018, the president signed a decree releasing Anglophone leaders detained for months because of the protests. Several others including journalists are still behind bars facing terrorism charges.

Crisis Group [26] states that defense and security forces responded with disproportionate force, leading to at least 40 deaths and over 100 injured protesters between 28 September and 2 October. This death toll is the result of live ammunition and excessive use of tear gas on those at homes as well as faithful going to church. Defense and security forces arrested hundreds of people without warrant, including those who were in their homes. They made use of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. Sexual abuse, destruction of property and looting of homes by soldiers and police, as well as shooting from helicopters at protesters in Kumba, Bamenda and near Buea were reported by a dozen residents, local politicians, senior officials, the press, human rights organizations and the Catholic bishops of the two regions.

According to Primus F. [27], the villages of secessionist leaders such as Ewele, Akwaya, Eyumodjock and Ekona were targeted by the defense and security forces, forcing thousands of young men to flee to the bush for fear of being killed or arrested and tortured. Violence, arrests and looting by military and police continued throughout the following week, notably in the department of Manyu. Suspected of secessionism, Deputy Mayor of Ndu was reportedly killed at home by the military on 2 October.

This widespread violence took place during a de facto state of emergency and martial law, imposed by the two regional governors from 29 September to 3 October: they enforced curfews, banned demonstrations and gatherings of more than four people, closed regional land and sea borders, brought in military reinforcements, banned all movement from one department to another, banned motorcycling, and cut off social networks, followed by the internet and electricity. On 1 October, people were also forbidden from leaving their homes [21].

Some senior officials and high-ranking officers explained that the excessive measures were due to lack of police officers, insufficient police equipment, the lack of blank cartridges and an inadequate stock or misuse of tear gas. Their claim was that gendarmes and police officers mismanaged their insufficient stock of tear gas by using it at homes, and ran out when facing protesters.

They also accused protesters of inciting unrest by burning vehicles that belonged to the sub-divisional officers and Divisional Officers in Boyo and Fundong (in the Northwest), snatching weapons from gendarmes in Kumba (in the Southwest), ransacking the police stations of Ikiliwindi, Mabanda Teke and Kongle, and reportedly throwing stones at police and military in Buea and Bamenda. Finally, they point out that some police officers and military personnel refused to participate in the violence, which meant that the security apparatus was understaffed [21].

The government official missions abroad to discuss with Cameroonians in the diaspora in August failed and it led to increased cases of arson and sporadic violence by unidentified splinter groups, violent repression of Anglophone activists by security forces on 22 September, bomb blasts in the Northwest, and a de facto state of emergency from 29 September to 3 October. Due to such murderous repression, secessionist ranks grew, and they firmly evoked the idea of an armed struggle or

“self-defense”. The crisis needed political solutions through the mediation of a credible mediator, such as the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) or the African Union and superficial measures and take responsibility in order to find political solutions to the crisis [26].

3.6 Social dynamic: the change of stance

According to Billy A et al. [28], the Anglophone conflict has escalated since 2016 because more Anglophone movements including those that praised the decentralization of power and those which supported federalism have joined pro-independence movements. They are armed and are committing violence as well as petitioning international and regional organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union to seek for a solution to the crisis. The current spate of violence that has caused a lot of deaths, bloodshed, and the destruction of properties started when lawyers and teachers protested. How have Ambazonians changed their stance for the past four years of the crisis?

When Southern Cameroonians watched the video [28] which describes in detail the massive and pervasive protest march which took place on the 22nd September and the 1st October 2017, they did not only considered the event as one “that gave nightmare for LRC” but noticed the enormous change that had taken place so far. In 2017, they wanted a federation but presently, they are fighting for total freedom: The analyses below are based on Ambazonians’ views on the ABC (The Ambazonia Broadcasting Corporation) television programme: Remembering September 22 2017.

“This is a rebroadcast of 2017 by then we wanted a federation. We have moved on to total independence,” “No to Federation,” “They have been killing our people with no remorse on daily bases big no to federation,” etc. [29].

They gladly acknowledged their pledge to fight for a free Ambazonia because as they said it is not given but won and that the spirit of a free Ambazonia dwells in them all. And they praise Honorable Wirba who shook the House of Assembly with his declaration and considered him a true prophet when he said: “When my people will raise even if you join your forces with that of France you will not win them,” Then they affirmed that until independence is achieved, there will be no peace in Cameroon.

“Ambazonia must be free,” “Independent or no peace” “the Ambazonian spirit lives on in every Ambazonian,” “We Ambazonians in the majority have consciously chosen freedom”. This freedom, we Ambazonians shall earn and it is not given. God help us » “I wish I will be alive. The Ngoketugia Marines will be there” [29].

This shows that the crisis has taken a dynamic and dramatic change from federation: staying with la République du Cameroun and managing their own affairs to total independence, that is, having nothing to do with French-speaking Cameroon because no political solution had been sought for the crisis but superficial and martial solutions. This was seen by the war draft that the Interim Government organized that almost 2 million dollars were raised to prosecute the war for independence.

Being assured of achieving their independence, they recommended the keeping of the videos because as they said many people in the crowd had been either killed or imprisoned by the Yaoundé regime:

“God gave us leaders. Look at that young man. Hope he is still alive,” “God cover you all with his blood brothers and sisters” “Videos like this must be kept. Many in that crowd have disappeared or they are in underground prisons” [29].

They considered those who spoke contrary to their views as foreigners or francophone; “All those speakers are Bamilikes and so we don’t expect anything better

from their responses,” “They are all Bamis,” “So funny to listen to them, who the hell are these men? In who’s name are they talking?” “All francophone, federalists or unionists have no more voice in the Ambazonian revolution,”

They also question why soldiers were killing only Anglophones “Look at the protests today. No Francophone Camerounian was killed” [29].

4. Protest march in French-speaking Cameroon

The Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) lawyer Emmanuel Simh told Human Rights Watch: “We have made dozens of demands for peaceful protests and, as usual, the authorities have turned them down. But we believe that we cannot arbitrarily withdraw the right to peaceful assembly, which is recognized by the constitution.” His supporters defied the ban on demonstration, and organized a two-day long anti-government protests against the presidential election results in the streets of Douala, Yaoundé, Dschang, Bafoussam and Mbouda.

As a result, Maurice Kamto was taken into custody from the house of Albert Dzungang, a party member, in the southwestern Douala city late on January 26 and was first transported to the premises of the judicial police of the Littoral region. From there, he was reportedly transferred to Yaoundé, along with around 150 demonstrators. Members of his inner circle Christian Penda Ekoka, Albert Dzungang, Celestin Djamen and Alain Fogue were also arrested for attempting to destabilize the state and for calling and organizing an unauthorized demonstrations or insurrection. Six MRC members were injured even Ndoki: a reputed lawyer. The match was violently repressed, the police used teargas and water to disperse the crowd and the police shot live bullets on the crowds. Kamto’s lawyers seized the UN about the “arbitrary” imprisonment of their client and other detained opponents, and called for their “immediate” release [30].

According to [31], the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) announced in early April that it would organize public demonstrations on April 6 and 13, 2019 to demand the immediate release of its president: Maurice Kamto who had been imprisoned for more than two months as well as to denounce “the selective modification of the electoral code” and the mismanagement of funds dedicated to the construction of stadiums for the 2019 African Nations Cup which Cameroon was to host. The Cameroonian government banned it and threatened: “The instigators and offenders, whoever they are, will come up against the rigor of the law”, and the government considered it to be a provocation and an act of insurgency. MRC was accused of destroying Cameroonian embassies in Paris and Berlin and the government threatened to suspend or ban the political party.

4.1 The 22 September 2020 in French Cameroon

Despite the restriction of protest march by the government, the coalition of opposition parties and civil society organization called Les Forces du Changement headed by Pr Maurice Kamto, president of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement expressed unhappiness through a forbidden protest march [32, 33]. The reasons for the peaceful march was to call for the revision of the electoral codes, peace in the North West and South West regions and for the president of the republic to leave power.

Early that morning, there was a strong deployment of well-armed security forces composed of policemen, gendarmes. They were positioned at all points in the towns of Douala, Yaoundé and Bafoussam in order to disperse protesters who had been manifesting. Despite the presence of the security forces, protesters

staged the march, security forces blocked Maurice Kamto at his home and they used teargas to disperse the crowd, as well as arrested and transported protesters in pick-ups.

An MRC leader said that “although it is a peaceful demonstration where the populations march with the flag of the country and tree branches, a symbol of peace, the army sprayed them with tear gas to disperse them, “ [17]. Why is it difficult to protest in Cameroon? (**Figures 6 and 7**).

4.2 Legislation on protest march in Cameroon: the anti-terrorism law

This part of the work examines why Cameroonians are refused the right to march peacefully and why the government represses them even when they have asked for an authorization to organize a peaceful march or when marching waving peace plants which indicate peace and not violence.

The Law No. 2014/028 of 23 December 2014 on the Suppression of Acts of Terrorism (Anti-Terrorism Law) has been making public manifestation difficult in Cameroon whether peaceful or violent. It considers terrorism to be “any act by an individual or groups of persons’ acting alone (or in group) as an accomplice or accessory, (who) commits or threatens to commit an act likely to cause death, endanger physical integrity, cause bodily injury or material damage, destroy natural resources, the environment or cultural heritage’ with the sole intention to: (a) intimidate the public or provoke a situation of terror; or (b) disrupt the national functioning of public services; or (c) create widespread insurrection. In all of these instances, the punishment is death” [36].



Figure 6.

Cameroon police used tear gas to break up protes. Source: Newvision:<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1527636/cameroon-police-tear-gas-break-protest> [34].



Figure 7.

Confrontation with police. Source: Anadoulou agency [35].

The government of Cameroon has been systemically violating fundamental human rights and freedoms since this law was enacted. The law is mostly used as a strategic framework to control the exercise and enjoyment of fundamental rights in Cameroon (whether peaceful or violent) [37]. The law is an anathema to human rights because the Military Court's interpretation and application of the law against the rights to strike and freedom of expression are wrong and unconstitutional. It is the new law on the repression of fundamental rights and the government has to amend it to reflect international human rights' commitments.

It is difficult to understand what is meant by the intent 'to intimidate the public or the intent to disrupt national functioning of public service within the normative content of section 2 that the government uses to arrest and condemn individuals with acts of terrorism. The enactment of the anti-terrorism law has disrupted the exercise and enjoyment of fundamental human rights and freedoms because people have been tagged, judged and imprisoned as terrorists by the Yaoundé Military Court [37].

In 2017, Ayah Paul Abine: a former Supreme Court Justice, was arbitrarily arrested without any warrant because he had expressed disappointment with the government's brutal treatment of English-speaking Cameroonians and suggested a return to federalism as a solution to the Anglophone crisis [38]. The powers-that-be simply instructed the police to arrest him. His arbitrary detention was because he had expressed his opinion. This was a clear indication of the violation of his right to freedom of expression and an obstacle to his physical, socio-economic and psychological development. It also indicates what the government of Cameroon is able to do to curtail the free exercise of fundamental human rights, contrary to its international commitments.

In 2017, Common Law Lawyers and the Teachers Associations of the Anglo-Saxon educational system of Cameroon carried out a peaceful strike demonstration but they were brutalized. Their arrest, detention and imprisonment were a flagrant violation of their fundamental rights which the government of Cameroon had committed to protect. According to [35], there was no possible justification for castigating the Common Law Lawyers and Anglo-Saxon teachers as terrorists, it was the government's attempt to abuse their fundamental rights instead of addressing their concerns. How did the actions and declarations of the Common Law Lawyers and Anglo-Saxon teachers, through civil disobedience against a perceived marginalization and erosion of the Anglo-Saxon system of education and Common Law legal practice, satisfied the requirements of section 2 of the anti-terrorism law?

A strike action which an administrative officer duly authorized was later considered a terrorist activity. On 28 of January 2019, the police arbitrarily arrested Maurice Kamto and 200 members of his political party, detained and charged them for sedition, rebellion, insurrection, destruction of public properties and vandalism for contesting the presidential elections, and they were likely to face the death penalty [39]. How on earth can a protest action against electoral fraud be translated into intimidation of the public, in order to qualify it as an act of terrorism? According to [37], although the destruction of public properties is an irresponsible act and should be condemned, it does not justify any charge of terrorism which is punishable by death. The government ought to have instead charged them with destruction of public properties and not terrorism. Destruction of public properties and looting are common aspects of (violent) strike actions globally and therefore they are not peculiar to Cameroon. No country in the world has considered violent strike action as an act of terrorism, as it is the case in Cameroon because the government does not want any opposition or criticism of any kind.

The anti-terrorism law has not spared the freedom of expression in journalism and the media. The police accused and arbitrarily arrested Samuel Wazizi: a local

broadcaster of CMTV in 2019 for speaking critically on the air on how the government had handled the (Anglophone) crisis [40]. Then the Motorized Infantry Battalion transferred him to Yaounde, neither his family nor his lawyer were allowed to contact him. He died in detention in 2020 because of torture. Four security forces also arbitrarily arrested Kinglsey Fumunyuy Njoka: a freelance journalist at his home and held him incommunicado for three weeks because he was accused of secessionism and collusion with pro-secessionists groups in the English-speaking part of the Cameroon [41]. On 12 June, he was placed under provisional detention for six months.

The above violations of human rights illustrate that the government of Cameroon uses the law as a political tool to quell dissent and silence political opponents instead of using it to fight against terrorism. On 24 February 2020, supporters of the ruling party protested in front of the French embassy in Yaoundé, against what they considered an insulting and unacceptable outing of President Emmanuel Macron of France on Saturday, 22 February 2020, accusing President Paul Biya for gross human rights violation [42]. Surprisingly, none of the protesters was arrested or charged with terrorism.

The anti-terrorism law has considerably abused the right to strike because any strike action is construed as a terrorist activity. Instead of promoting such democratic values and principles premised on the respect of fundamental human rights, the government has improvised (through legislative means) attempts to disallow, limit and inhibit freedom of expression, on the grounds of terrorism, just to justify restriction. The antiterrorism law has helped the administration to vehemently suppress every opinion exercised through the right to freedom of expression that does not support the regime. Any opposition or criticism of the government is deemed an outright act of terrorism or insurrection or hostility against the state.

It is impossible to understand how the government arrest and detain citizens for exercising their rights within the frame of international and African human rights law and the Constitution. Abusing freedom of expression is implicitly curtailing other linked rights-based entitlements. In the context of press freedom, the right to freedom of expression entails a free, uncensored and unhindered press to comment on public concerns and to inform public opinions on matters that relate to their fundamental rights and freedoms. It permits the media to execute their duties freely and objectively. Curtailing journalists' rights who, in principle, ought to express views and raise awareness on socio-economic, cultural, political and religious developments in the country and the world at large, is tantamount to a violation of the right to freedom of expression and press freedom [37].

Therefore, the anti-terrorism law is not meant to fight against terrorism but against every peaceful marches in Cameroon. All the repressed marches we have seen above were meant to be peaceful and not violent; and the application of this legislation was not necessary.

4.3 Reaction to the restriction of protest march

Many international organizations and people have reacted to the protest march restriction in Cameroon. They have called on Cameroon to amend the law because it suppresses the expression of human rights in Cameroon.

Meeting in Geneva on the 11 December, 2018, the UN human rights experts criticized the crackdown against protesters in Cameroon and called on the government to protect freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. They stated that the International human rights standards give the right to everyone to take part in peaceful demonstrations. The law must not provide any restriction to

the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression and it must be proportional. They clearly stated that: “The restrictions imposed lately by the Cameroonian authorities on the rights to peaceful assembly and expression appear to ignore such criteria, provided for by the international instruments to which Cameroon is a party.” According to them, the country’s 2014 anti-terrorism law should not be used to curtail peaceful assembly, marches or demonstrations organized by political parties during an electoral process [43].

Lewis Mudge who is the Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch said: “These steps are a thinly veiled attempt by the Cameroonian government to use the Covid-19 pandemic and the draconian anti-terror law as a pretext to quell the right to assemble,” “Cameroon’s authorities should protect and facilitate the right to assemble, not seek to curb it” [44].

The above clearly shows how the government uses the terrorism law to curtail its citizens’ human rights. We then examine below how the people in Cameroon and beyond react to such abuse of human rights. We present people’s reactions using their Facebook posts.

After the march 22 September 2020 many posts were sent and many commentaries were made but we have decided to use the post that the Togolese Activist Farida Bemba Crache sent pouring her venom on the regime in Yaoundé. The post was shared 427 times and about half a thousand commentaries were made about it. Equally; the commentaries have an international character because the commentators were both Cameroonians in the country and those in the diaspora. And it compares the situation in Cameroon to those in other French-speaking countries in Africa. In order to make sense of the feelings of people both Cameroonians and non-Cameroonians, we made an effort to categorize their responses.

The post reads: “In Cameroon, Paul Biya and his government ban the demonstrations of Maurice Kamto’s MRC, deploy soldiers everywhere to beat, gas and intimidate the populations and at the end of the day, the henchmen of this regime come back to say that Cameroonians do not want change and that the demonstration flopped in Yaoundé. But if the Biya regime really thinks that Maurice Kamto and his people have no power to mobilize, why ban the demonstrations? These are the same nonsense that is happening in Togo, Guinea, Ivory Coast and in all these colonial enclosures where criminals are installed in power.”

The commentaries expressed optimism and determination by saying that the population will triumph shortly over the government’s brutality. They thought that the time would come when the government would not contain them meaning the population had not given up hope for the fight for liberation despite the oppression. They said real people do not need any police authorization before marching peacefully. They advise the population to spontaneously go out in mass and do whatever they want. They agreed that marches should not be stopped but people should go out massively to police stations or divisional offices to ask for their compatriots. They agree that if they did not act in solidarity, they would always be threatened. They advised that the marches in Mali, Sudan were never authorized but they took place. “They will never have the last word ---- a time will come when they cannot contain us. God is in control for the speechless. Cheer up.”

What is interesting about the post was its conflicting nature because it was like a battle between those in the ruling party and those in the opposition. While those in the opposition say the people will raise, those in the ruling party retorted by saying: “Which people are you talking about??? Really the people do not support you _ it is clear,” “Of what people it is question,” “Who are the people exactly,” “You mobilized some Bamilekes and you talk of people.” « A few Bamilekes as you say but who are making a good number afraid » This means that the people did not represent the diversity of the Cameroonian people but from a particular group

or region. It expresses a tribalistic tendency when they attach the region of those who protested to the region of the main opposition leader Maurice Kamto in order to trivialize the march protest.

“Go and win using the ballot box,” “The people of West Region or Cameroon,” which means that they do not have any population supporting them and that they should win using the ballot boxes, that is, through election and not through violence but they complained elections results were distorted. “Where have these elections results been stolen?” By so saying they meant that elections in Cameroon are well-organized: free and fair and any other reason to protest is purely out of violence.

The opposition says “if elections are free we will win, the government is a demon,” The ruling party supporter retorted by saying that

“The ruling party is a demon once people come out of the manger.” They meant that people would criticize the government whenever they were unable to benefit from it and not really that it was bad but because they did not longer benefit it. They cited: Kamto, Ekoko and Dzungang who were once in the government but are now criticizing it.

They ended up by saying that they had no other option but to protest: “What do people have to do in a country where repression and electoral fraud reign? Where peaceful marches recognized in the constitution are forbidden? Where directors of public companies embezzle public funds where the population is crying of hunger but are not listened to by the president? Where a few live in affluence while a majority live in poverty. It was because of these reasons that the population was obliged to protest peacefully for their rights and not to overthrow the government.

5. Theoretical implications

Marx and Engels [45] famously argued that, in any epoch, the dominant ideas are the ruling ideas in society which has helped to maintain the dominance of the ruling classes. Those who control economic production also manipulate the production of ideas, and the class which is the material force of society is at the same time the ruling intellectual force. They rule as thinkers and producers of ideas and regulate the production and distribution of ideas of their age. Similarly, the government Cameroon has been producing ideas not just to suppress Southern Cameroonians because of their dominance over the economy, judiciary and political institutions but equally the entire country in the sense that they are in control of the judiciary and the media. They produce ideas which does benefit the general interest but to protect their interest: the anti-terrorism law for instance is to check any uprising against them and they use it not to control terrorism but to hinder the growth of the opposition party in order to maintain themselves in power.

Equally, the origin of the Ambazonia uprising is as a result of a dominant and not a consensual cultural hegemony. The Ambazonia crisis is an attempt of Southern Cameroonians to break the dominant Francophone cultural hegemony. French-speaking Cameroon has been making efforts not just to dominate them but to absorb them into the broader Francophone cultural system. They silently destroyed the statehood of Anglophones-not by the French-speaking community at large, but by the government which was led and dominated by Francophone.

What led to the Lawyers and teacher protest marches in the English-speaking part of Cameroon was their lower perceived social status as compared to the Francophone. This led to the creation of a “social identity” of the English-speaking part of Cameroon, what [46, 47] refers to as “the part of their self-concept which

derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". Their self-concept (or, equivalently, self-image) is their self-evaluation in their being in union with French-speaking Cameroon. When they compare their social status to that of Francophone, they have a negative perception of themselves: that of marginalized people which is a negative or a low social identity. Accordingly, they try to change this situation of a low or negative social status by mobilizing their members for a protest march as it was on the 22nd September, 2017. This is exactly the hypothesis of SIT: "When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive to leave their existing groups and join some more positively distinct group and/or make their group more positively distinct" [48]. Since they have been unable to make their situation more favorable comparatively to the Francophone, today, they are clamoring for absolute independence to manage their own affairs.

They have therefore constructed a collective identity which is a collectivity of actors with a common goal. And the common goal for a good number is absolute independence. Their emotional bonds enable them to successfully organize lock-downs and execute the weekly ghost towns and do many other activities that can enhance their freedom from fifty year marginalization

We can also use the Ration Choice Theory (RCT) to explain Protest March participations in French-speaking Cameroon. We formulate it in the following way: Cameroonians choose the action that is least costly and most beneficial for them. "Political protest" is an action. Instead of engaging in a civil war to dislodge the system which has been ruling for nearly forty years, they prefer to choose the least costly one in terms of human lives losses in order to change the system. Maurice Kamto has even said that he would not walk on human blood before getting the presidency. Therefore, in order to explain protest, RCT prompts us to search for those costs and benefits that might instigate people to participate in protests. What are these costs and benefits? The cost of the protest march in Cameroon is that many people will die and will be arrested and imprison as it is the case in both parts of Cameroon and the benefits are that they will internationalize their local problem, maybe change the system and as for the Ambazonia, they may end up gaining their independence. This is the extent to which they think their action or protest makes a difference.

6. Conclusions

Citizens of French-speaking Cameroon are protesting against bad governance, they want to put away the current political system which has been in power for over 38 years while those in Ambazonia on their part are seeking for secession. Whether in English or French-speaking Cameroon, the government's response to protest marches violates articles 5, 7, 9, 18, 19 and 20 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration of which Cameroon is a signatory.

Article 5 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration states that "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" but this is not the case in Cameroon because opposition leaders are often cruelly treated. They are either held incommunicado for months or cruelly beaten at SED. The imprisoned Ambazonia leader Julius Ayuk Tabe and his cabinet members commonly called the 'Nera 10' were held incommunicado for six months and later on condemned to life imprisonment. The militants of MRC were victims of cruel treatment by the government of Cameroon and some including journalists have died in the prison as a result.

The government of Cameroon has also failed to respect article 7 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration which states that ‘All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.’ This is not the case when it concerns protest marches in Cameroon. While the government charges opposition leaders who organize protest marches with terrorism and insurrection, arrest and imprison them, those who organize it to support the government go free.

Although article 9 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration states that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile,” this is not the case in Cameroon where people who organize protest marches, those who criticize the government are arrested without a warrant and imprison without being judged. Hundreds of those who protested in the Anglophone crisis have been in prison now for over four years without being judged.

Article 19 of the “Universal Human Rights Declaration also states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” This seems not to be the case with the government of Cameroon which is arresting opposition leaders and journalists whose opinion differs from theirs. Therefore Cameroon is becoming a much more dictatorial than a democratic nation.

Equally, article 20 (1) of the Universal Human Rights Declaration states that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.” This is not the case in Cameroon where there is always a strong deployment of well-armed security forces composed of policemen, gendarmes and they are positioned at all levels to disperse protesters.

For Cameroon to ameliorate its human Rights condition, we recommend that the Government of Cameroon should do the following:

- urgently organize an inclusive dialogue for a peaceful and lasting solution to the crisis in Ambazonia. The National dialogue the government organized has failed, it should then meet the separatists in a neutral ground preferably the Swiss-led process which the separatists and many leading countries in the world have endorsed.
- dialogue with the opposition outside the parliament to build consensus on electoral reform and to reduce the wide gap between them and their rivals and carry some reforms on a more independent national elections body, timelier and more transparent election results.
- trace the historical origins of the Anglophone crisis and identify the gaps and provide an answer as to why the transition from federal to unitary state brought feelings of discontent across a section of the country’s population over time.
- immediately take all steps to bring an end to the violence and impunity in the country by withdrawing its military from Ambazonia for sincere dialogue to take place;
- give UN an immediate and unrestricted access to the Northwest and Southwest regions and the international community should call on the Government of Cameroon to launch independent investigations into reports of human rights abuses by state forces and urge the Government to cooperate closely with the UN.

- encourage independent civil society which is essential to uphold human rights and the rule of law and therefore uplift the ban of the activities of the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium and ensure an open space in which civil society can operate;
- not to try civilians in military courts and to release all protesters immediately and drop all politically-motivated charges and cease all harassment and intimidation of political activists, including the ban on peaceful political gatherings, demonstrations and protests, and to take action to clamp down on instances of hate speech and not to seek the death penalty for political activists and protesters;
- stop the misuse of the 2014 anti-terrorism law which restricts peaceful assembly; therefore the Government should urgently take steps to ensure these rights are protected for all people in Cameroon including lifting the ban on opposition demonstrations and launching a review of the provisions of the anti-terrorism law;
- welcome criticisms and perceive it as a vital platform for advancing the spirit and continuum of democratic values of transparency and accountability
- build a genuine, representative and vibrant democracy; by convening all political stakeholders for a consensual review of the electoral system, with the aim of ensuring a free, transparent and credible electoral process; and this process should take place before any further elections, in order to promote peace and avoid post-electoral crises;
- help Cameroonians to reimagine a 21st century society where everybody comes with his own uniqueness, and guaranteed a means of celebrating and preserving it [49–51].

Finally for people to freely express themselves and better enjoy their human rights, the anti-terrorism law must be amended and there must be dialogue not as the government wants as it was the case with the Cameroon National dialogue but one that includes the main protagonists like the Swiss-led process which has been endorsed by many countries. Equally, the government must dialogue not only with the parties represented in the National Assembly but also with those out of the National Assembly. Finally, the electoral list must be revised and there must be transparency in voting without any manipulation by the party in power.

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