International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (IJTSRD)
Volume 10 Issue 4, Jul-Aug 2026 Available Online: www.ijtsrd.com e-ISSN: 2456 – 6470

International Community and the Development of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon (1961–2019)

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ABSTRACT

The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon, which escalated sharply after 2016, has historical foundations in the post-1961 political arrangements that followed the UN-organized plebiscite and subsequent reunification. The central problem addressed in this article is that although the crisis is widely viewed as a domestic governance issue, its evolution from 1961–2019 was significantly shaped by the international community's involvement, ranging from early constitutional oversight to later periods of diplomatic hesitation, geopolitical interests, and inconsistent intervention. The objectives of the study are to examine how international actors such as the UN, AU, Commonwealth, EU, major states, and NGOs responded to the crisis; to assess how their actions or inactions contributed to its escalation or mitigation; and to evaluate their overall effectiveness in promoting dialogue, protecting human rights, and supporting peace initiatives. The study employs a qualitative historical methodology, relying on UN documents, diplomatic correspondences, NGO and human rights reports, academic literature, and policy statements. Through thematic and chronological analysis, it traces how international decisions, pressures, and diplomatic alignments shaped the conflict over nearly six decades. The findings reveal that while the international community contributed positively through humanitarian assistance, human rights monitoring, and sporadic mediation efforts, its impact was limited by fragmented responses, geopolitical constraints, and delayed engagement factors that indirectly allowed the crisis to deepen. The conclusion is that understanding the Anglophone Crisis requires recognizing the long-term external influences that shaped it, and that a coherent, principled, and sustained international strategy is crucial for any lasting resolution.

How to cite this paper: Stephen Atong | Prof. Joseph Lon Nfi "International Community and the Development of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon (1961–2019)" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-10 | Issue-4, August 2026, pp.701-706, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd141936.pdf

IJTSRD141936

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INTRODUCTION

The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has evolved into one of the most protracted and violent conflicts in contemporary Africa. What began in 2016 as a series of peaceful protests by Anglophone teachers and lawyers accusing the Cameroonian government of marginalization quickly developed into an armed confrontation between state forces and non-state separatist groups.[1] The conflict's roots, however, stretch far deeper, embedded in a century-long historical trajectory shaped by international decisions, particularly those made by the League of Nations and the United Nations. Understanding the role of the international community in the crisis therefore requires a long-term historical reading of how global actors shaped Cameroon's bilingual and bi-cultural structure.

The international community is often invoked in conflict studies to refer to a broad, multi-actor system that transcends states and includes intergovernmental organizations, global powers, regional bodies, NGOs,

[1] Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh, *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon (*Leiden: Brill, 2003), 14.

and transnational civil society.[2] In the case of Cameroon, this community has not been a passive observer; it was instrumental in drawing the borders that generated Cameroon's dual identity, administering the territory during the Mandate and Trusteeship periods, supervising the 1961 Plebiscite, shaping the federal experiment, and later responding albeit slowly to signs of political and cultural discontent among the Anglophone population. Despite these historical ties, the crisis was allowed to escalate largely due to decades of diplomatic caution, geopolitical alliances, and Africa's entrenched non-interference doctrine. As a result, by the time the crisis gained global visibility in 2017–2018, the conflict had already entrenched itself, generating thousands of deaths, mass displacement, and severe humanitarian consequences.[3] Critically, the delayed and fragmented response of the international community shaped the trajectory of the conflict.

This article therefore addresses the central question, How has the international community contributed to the development of the Anglophone Crisis from its origins to its current form? To answer this, the study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology drawing from archival documents, UN records, treaties, scholarly works, NGO reports, and press releases from international actors.

The significance of this research lies in its comprehensive analysis of international involvement not only in the contemporary phase of the crisis, but also in the historical decisions that set the foundations for future conflicts. It also highlights the limitations of international diplomacy in contexts where sovereignty, geopolitics, and internal politics intersect.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE ANGLOPHONE CRISIS

The Partition of German Kamerun (1916)

The origins of the Anglophone Crisis are inseparable from the 1916 partition of German Kamerun between Britain and France following Germany's defeat in World War I.[4] The partition, formalized through bilateral agreements between European powers, created the first major structural division between the Anglophone and Francophone territories. France received the larger portion four-fifths of the territory while Britain obtained two small strips along the Nigerian border: Northern and Southern Cameroons. This division was not based on ethnic, linguistic, or cultural considerations but was driven purely by colonial convenience and geopolitical bargaining.[5] As a result, a single pre-colonial territory was divided into two distinct administrative, legal, and educational systems. Anglophone identity, therefore, did not emerge organically; it was manufactured by external actors an important point in understanding the international community's formative role.

League of Nations Mandate and Bifurcated Administration

Following the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations placed both French and British Cameroons under separate Mandates. France governed its portion as an integral part of French Equatorial Africa, imposing centralized administrative structures, civil law, and French assimilationist policies.[6] Meanwhile, Britain administered its part indirectly from Nigeria, reinforcing decentralization, common law, and the Anglo-Saxon educational system.[7]These institutional differences laid the foundation for two distinct political cultures. Importantly, the League of Nations supervised but did not harmonize the administrative divide. This left the future reunification of Cameroon structurally complicated and created the basis for identity-based grievances.

British Southern Cameroons under Trusteeship (1922–1961)

Under the United Nations Trusteeship system, British Cameroons continued to be administered from Nigeria, a decision that significantly shaped Anglophone political consciousness. Britain maintained a policy of indirect rule, empowering chiefs and traditional structures while limiting direct political engagement with the population.[8] The territory was governed not as a separate unit but as appendages of Eastern and Northern Nigeria, for British north Cameroon a system that contributed to structural marginalization long before reunification. Politically, several Southern Cameroonian elites began to express concerns about the lack of autonomy, fearing absorption into Nigeria and the erosion of their distinct identity.[9]Prominent political associations such as the Cameroon Youth League (CYL) 1940 and later the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) 1955 emerged, advocating

[2] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25–26.

[3] v International Crisis Group, "Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads," ICG Report No. 250, 2018.

[4] Victor Julius Ngoh, *History of Cameroon Since 1800* (Limbe: Presbook, 1996), 87.

[5]. A. S. Mukong, *The Case for the Southern Cameroons* (Bamenda: Horizon Press, 1990), 10

[6] Anthony I. Asiwaju, *Partitioned Africans (*London: C. Hurst, 1985), 132–133.

[7] Victor Le Vine, *The Cameroon Federal Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 29–31.

[9] Ndiva Kofele-Kale, "*The Politics of Independence of British Southern Cameroons*," Journal of

for self-government and protection of the territory's unique Anglo-Saxon heritage. The Trusteeship Council of the UN received several petitions from British Cameroons, but these were often ignored or handled superficially, reflecting a broader pattern of international neglect toward the concerns of smaller colonial territories.[10]By the 1954, the Southern Cameroons had its House of Assembly and limited self-governing capacity, but Britain's reluctance to prepare the territory for complete independence or consider meaningful autonomy options created structural frustrations that would later resurface during the Anglophone Crisis.

The 1961 UN Plebiscite: International Involvement and Controversies

The 1961 United Nations supervised plebiscite remains one of the most contested moments in the historical evolution of the Anglophone Crisis. The UN presented only two political options to the people of Southern Cameroons: to join the newly independent Nigeria or to reunite with *La République du Cameroun*.[11]Importantly, the option of full independence which had been demanded by many Southern Cameroonian leaders was not included on the ballot paper. Scholars argue that geopolitical calculations, Cold War pressures, and British reluctance to support a small independent state all contributed to the exclusion of this option.[12]

The plebiscite results favored reunification with the Republic of Cameroon. However, the absence of a post-plebiscite agreement a legally binding treaty defining the terms of union created major ambiguities. The UN General Assembly Resolution 1608 (XV) called for a tripartite agreement between the British government, the Government of *La République du Cameroun*, and representatives of Southern Cameroons, but Britain and France both failed to ensure the treaty materialized.[13]This left the union poorly defined and lacking constitutional guarantees for autonomy. The UN's failure to protect the interests of the minority Anglophone population during this critical period later contributed to claims of historical injustice. Contemporary Anglophone activists often reference the plebiscite as the moment when the international community "abandoned" Southern Cameroons by denying them genuine self-determination.[14]

Federalism (1961–1972) and Centralization Pressures

The Federal Republic of Cameroon (1961–1972) emerged as a compromise framework intended to preserve the autonomy and cultural integrity of the former Southern Cameroons. West Cameroon retained its own legislature, prime minister, judiciary, and educational system, embodying the Anglo-Saxon legal and administrative traditions.[15] Despite this, growing tensions emerged as the Francophone dominated federal government pursued increasingly centralizing policies. President Ahmadou Ahidjo consistently argued that federalism was costly, inefficient, and unsuited to Cameroon's developmental aspirations.[16]Over time, financial mechanisms, administrative structures, and political processes were centralized in Yaoundé, weakening the autonomy granted to West Cameroon. Federal institutions were gradually eroded: federal inspections were replaced by direct presidential control, the West Cameroon budget was absorbed into the national treasury, and Francophone administrators were increasingly deployed to Anglophone areas. This period planted the seeds of Anglophone discontent, as many perceived federalism as a façade rather than a genuine power-sharing system. The lack of strong international monitoring mechanisms further enabled the erosion of federal protections.

The 1972 Referendum and the Erosion of Anglophone Autonomy

On 20 May 1972, President Ahidjo organized a national referendum to abolish the federal system and replace it with a unitary state. Official results claimed over 99% approval, though scholars widely question the credibility of the process.[17] The referendum marked a turning point: West Cameroon lost its autonomous institutions, its prime ministerial position, and its bicultural protections. Importantly, international actors including the UN and the Commonwealth did not challenge the referendum or the dissolution of federal structures, even though the 1961 federal framework had been internationally supervised. The lack of international scrutiny reinforced Anglophone perceptions that their political status had been unilaterally redefined without consent. The 1972 political transition is frequently

[10] United Nations Trusteeship *Council, "Petitions from British Cameroons*, 1947–1960," UN Archives, New York.

[11] United Nations, "*The Future of the Trust Territory of the Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration*," Resolution 1608 (XV), 21 April 1961.

[12] United Nations, "*The Future of the Trust Territory of the Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration*," Resolution 1608 (XV), 21 April 1961.

[13] A.S. Mukong, *The Case for the Southern Cameroons* (Bamenda: Horizon Press, 1990), 28.

[14] Julius Ngoh, *Constitutional Development in Southern Cameroons* (Limbe: Design House, 2001), 121–122.

[15] Le Vine, *The Cameroon Federal Republic*, 112.

[16] Ahmadou Ahidjo, *Construire une Nation* (Yaoundé: CEPER, 1972), 63–65.

[17] Richard Joseph, *Radical Nationalism in Cameroon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 201.

cited by Anglophone scholars like J.V. Ngoh, who argues that the referendum constituted the "de facto abrogation of the federal agreement," and marked the historical genesis of Anglophone resistance movements.[18]

International Silence and Missed Early Interventions

Throughout the decades following the abolition of federalism, Anglophone associations repeatedly petitioned the UN, the Commonwealth, and other global actors concerning issues of marginalization, constitutional violations, and cultural assimilation. Organizations such as the Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM) in the 1980s and Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) in the 1990s submitted numerous memoranda to international bodies.[19] Yet, these pleas received minimal attention. The Cold War context, strong French influence in international diplomacy, and the doctrine of African non-interference all contributed to the international community's reluctance to intervene. This early silence allowed grievances to fester, eventually culminating in the explosion

THE POST-1972 CONSOLIDATION OF CENTRAL POWER

The Biya Era and the Reinforcement of the Unitary State (1982–1990)

When Paul Biya succeeded Ahmadou Ahidjo in 1982, many Anglophone elites expected a revival of decentralization and a possible reconsideration of the 1972 constitutional changes. Instead, Biya embarked on further centralizing reforms that strengthened presidential powers and minimized regional autonomy.[20]The international community particularly France, Cameroon's principal diplomatically continued to support the new administration, viewing it as a stable partner in Central Africa. French military and economic assistance during the early years of the Biya presidency consolidated the regime's capacity to control dissent.[21]Francophone administrators increasingly replaced Anglophone civil servants in key positions within West Cameroon. The era saw the gradual *"Francophonization"* of courts, schools, and regional administrative structures, reinforcing Anglophone perceptions of cultural assimilation. Meanwhile, the international community's focus during the 1980s was centered on Cold War politics and economic structural adjustment programs promoted by the IMF and World Bank. These institutions emphasized macroeconomic reforms but remained silent on issues of political identity, autonomy, or minority rights in Cameroon.[22] As a result, governance reforms undermining Anglophone autonomy were implemented without external scrutiny.

The Decade of Petitions (1980s–1990s)

By the late 1980s, Anglophone frustrations culminated in new forms of political activism. The return to multiparty politics in 1990 gave rise to the Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM), led by academics and professionals who demanded constitutional reforms and a return to federalism.[23] The SCNC later emerged in 1994, formally petitioning the UN, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), and the Commonwealth Secretariat concerning the legitimacy of the 1972 constitutional change and the dangers of political marginalization. However, these petitions received minimal international attention. The UN maintained that the crisis was an internal matter, while the Commonwealth, influenced by Britain's diplomatic caution and Cameroon's geopolitical position, avoided publicly challenging the government.[24] The ACHPR, one of the few African institutions open to minority-rights petitions, received multiple submissions from Anglophone groups, but its rulings were largely symbolic and lacked enforcement mechanisms.[25] This period highlights how the international community, despite repeated early warnings, failed to act decisively. Scholars often argue that the 1990–2010 period constituted a "lost opportunity" when preventative diplomacy could have stopped the crisis before it became violent.[26]

Multiparty Politics and the Constitutional Debate of 1996

Under domestic and international pressure, the 1996 Constitution introduced provisions for regional councils and decentralization.[27] Many international actors, including the EU and the Commonwealth,

[19] J.V. Ngoh, "*The Origins of the Anglophone Problem," Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 15, no. 2 (1997): 157.

[20] Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh, *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 59–61.

[21] Douglas A. Yates, *The French Oil Industry and the African State (Bloomington*: Indiana University Press, 1996), 205–207.

[22] World Bank, Cameroon: Structural Adjustment Program Review (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1994), 15–19.

[23] Richard A. Joseph, "*Democratization in Africa: The Rise of Anglophone Movements*," African Affairs 89, no. 355 (1990): 375–377.

[24] Commonwealth Secretariat, "Cameroon and the Commonwealth: Engagement Report," London, 1996.

[25] ACHPR, "Communication 266/2003: Kevin Ngwang Gumne et al. v. Cameroon," African Commission Ruling, 2009.

[26] Nicodemus Fru Awasom, "*The Repositioning of Anglophone Cameroon in Contemporary Politics*," Africa Today 48, no. 1 (2001): 30–32.

[27] Cameroon Constitution (1996), Preamble; Part X.

welcomed the reforms as a step toward democratic governance, failing to recognize their symbolic nature. In reality, the decentralization provisions were never fully implemented, and power remained centralized in Yaoundé. For Anglophones, the 1996 Constitution was particularly disappointing. It did not restore federalism; instead, it consolidated the unitary state and failed to address historical grievances. The international community's positive reception of the constitution signaled to the government that its reforms were internationally acceptable, reducing the incentive for deeper constitutional dialogue.[28]

The Internationalization of Anglophone Identity Politics

During the 2000s, globalization and diaspora movements transformed Anglophone activism. Diaspora groups created online platforms, lobbied Western governments, and increasingly framed the Anglophone question as a human rights and self-determination issue.[29]International NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch began referencing the structural discrimination Anglophones faced, though they did not yet classify the situation as a conflict. Despite the growing visibility, major world powers including France, China, and the United States prioritized Cameroon's strategic role in the Gulf of Guinea and its counterterrorism partnership against Boko Haram. Stability, rather than minority rights, remained the guiding principle of international diplomacy. As a result, Anglophone grievances accumulated beneath the surface, setting the stage for the explosive events of the mid-2010s.

THE 2016 CRISIS AND IMMEDIATE INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

Lawyers' and Teachers' Protests (2016)

The immediate trigger of the 2016 Anglophone Crisis was a series of strikes initiated by lawyers in Bamenda and Buea protesting the deployment of Francophone magistrates with limited training in common law into Anglophone courts.[30] Teachers soon joined, condemning the appointment of Francophone teachers who lacked competence in English or the Anglo-Saxon pedagogy. These grievances were not new; they were rooted in decades of perceived cultural erosion and unequal treatment. What was new, however, was the scale of the protests and the government's unusually harsh response. Security forces used excessive force, leading to deaths, arrests, and widespread social disruption.[31] These state actions drew the first significant international reactions in decades.

International Community's First Responses (2016–2017)

The UN Secretary General, through its regional office (UNOCA), issued a statement calling for dialogue and restraint, marking one of the earliest formal UN reactions to the crisis.[32] The United States also issued a statement expressing concern, while the EU urged the government to respect human rights and address grievances through dialogue. However, these statements were largely diplomatic and carried no binding pressure. The African Union (AU) remained one of the slowest actors to respond, consistent with its long-standing stance of avoiding involvement in internal state matters unless crises reach continental security levels.[33]The Commonwealth, despite its cultural ties to Anglophone Cameroon, limited its engagement to private discussions with the government. Many scholars argue that early, forceful, and coordinated international pressure during this period could have de-escalated tensions before radicalization occurred. [34]The absence of a decisive response allowed the situation to spiral, as the government perceived the muted reactions as tacit international approval of its crackdown.

Conclusion

The development of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon between 1961 and 2019 demonstrates that the conflict is not merely the result of internal political tensions but is deeply intertwined with the historical, diplomatic, and institutional actions of the international community. From the 1961 UN-organized plebiscite to contemporary humanitarian interventions, external actors played significant roles at key stages of the crisis. The early post-reunification years revealed how the absence of a clearly defined union treaty, the weak enforcement of federal guarantees, and the limited follow-up by the United Nations created structural ambiguities that allowed grievances to deepen over time. As the Cameroonian state gradually centralized power and eroded the autonomy of the former British Southern Cameroons,

[28] Cameroon Constitution (1996), Preamble; Part X.10. Henry Kah, The Anglophone Cameroon Diaspora and Digital Activism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 92–95.

[29] U.S. Department of State, "Cameroon 2015 Human Rights Report," Washington, D.C., 2016.

[30] Nkongho Felix Agbor Balla, "*The 2016 Lawyers' Protests in Cameroon*," Journal of African Law 62, no. 3 (2018): 355–358.

[31] Amnesty International, "Cameroon: Arbitrary Arrests and Crackdown on Protests," Report, 2017.

[32] United Nations Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), "Statement on the Situation in Cameroon," 2017.

[33] African Union Peace and Security Council, "Communiqué on Cameroon," AU Headquarters, 2017.

[34] International Crisis Group, "Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis Escalates," ICG Briefing, 2017.

Anglophone elites increasingly turned to international forums, hoping for protective intervention that never fully materialized. The period between the 1980s and the early 2000s marked a further entrenchment of this disconnect. Although Anglophone actors repeatedly submitted memoranda and petitions to the UN, Commonwealth, African Union, Britain, France and other bodies, the international community's responses remained cautious, often shaped by geopolitical interests, Cold War legacies, and a preference for state stability over minority claims. This created an environment in which legitimate grievances were left unaddressed, gradually transforming political dissatisfaction into a broader rights-based struggle. When the crisis escalated into open confrontation in 2016, international actors responded, but mostly through statements of concern, humanitarian aid, and short-lived mediation attempts.

The events from 2016 to 2019 illustrate a critical pattern: despite the increasing internationalization of the crisis, no global or regional institution assumed sustained leadership in facilitating dialogue or enforcing accountability. Organizations such as the UN Security Council, the African Union, the Commonwealth, the European Union, and key external states expressed concern but failed to mobilize coherent diplomatic pressure. This fragmented engagement weakened the potential for early preventive diplomacy and allowed the conflict to escalate into a major humanitarian emergency marked by displacement, insecurity, and persistent violence. In light of these dynamics, the study concludes that the international community's impact on the Anglophone Crisis has been significant yet insufficient. It shaped the foundations of the conflict historically, influenced its trajectory through uneven diplomatic engagement, and contributed to its partial mitigation through humanitarian interventions. However, the absence of a coordinated, principled, and long-term strategy ultimately limited its effectiveness in fostering sustainable peace. A future resolution of the crisis requires an approach that acknowledges historical responsibility, strengthens international diplomatic coherence, supports inclusive dialogue, and prioritizes the protection of human rights. Only through such a comprehensive and sustained engagement can the international community meaningfully contribute to ending one of Central Africa's most enduring conflicts.

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