

Security in Cameroon: A Growing Risk of Persistent Insurgency

Abstract

What is Cameroon's current security situation and how is it likely to change in the future? Cameroon faces internal insurgencies, conflicts in neighboring states, and an impending power transition. In this commentary we provide a holistic account of the security issues facing Cameroon, drawing particular attention to five recent trends: the decline of rural governance; a shift in the pattern of ethnic competition; a reduced government capacity; the negative consequences of coup-proofing and an emerging multipolar international system undermining Cameroon's diplomatic strategy. Contrary to accounts that highlight the risks of general civil war, we argue that Cameroon's government retains sufficient 'national power' to prevent the center's collapse. However, we see a heightened risk of persistent insurgencies outside the center in the future due to multiple grievances and weak counterinsurgency capability. The contradictions of past security policy can no longer be overcome.

Keywords: national security, insurgency, stability, Cameroon, Africa

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I. Introduction

In April 2022, a few weeks after the invasion of Ukraine, a leaked document revealed that the Government of Cameroon had just renewed its existing military accord with Russia. Cameroon has diverse military accords with multiple partners as a way of balancing the interests of external powers and maintaining regime stability. What was new, however, was that Russia sought to publicize this accord as part of Moscow's broader strategy of undermining claims of a global alliance opposed to their actions in Ukraine. Cameroon's inability to maintain a low profile in this incident demonstrates the challenges it faces in sustaining its long-standing policy of keeping a low diplomatic profile (*'profil bas'*). Military accords with Russia are not new, but Russia's strategic use of information demonstrates the new challenges Cameroon faces in managing its international relations.

Cameroon currently faces a series of security challenges both internally and within the Central and West African region. Wars in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) generate refugees, small arms trading, and criminality in Cameroon's eastern border areas. To the west, along the 2000km long border with Nigeria, there is the Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency that has significantly affected Cameroon's Far North (FN) region (ICG 2016, 2018a). Tens of thousands of people have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced (Iweze 2020; Mahamat 2021). Moving south along the border with Nigeria there is insecurity relating to pastoralists, secessionist conflicts and maritime piracy (Egbuta 2018; Ajala 2020). Internally, there is an insurgency in the Northwest (NW) and Southwest (SW) Regions,

building on grievances among the English-speaking minority in Cameroon (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997, 2018; Annan et al 2021; Keutcheu 2021; Orock 2022). By 2021, this anglophone insurgency seeking to establish a new state of Ambazonia had cost thousands of lives and displaced tens of thousands of people (Agwanda, Nyadera, and Asal 2020; Crawford et al 2022). The military response from the state has provided some fragile stability in a few urban centers but it has not brought law and order back, especially not in the NW region. Instead, a ‘war economy’ has become established in which various parties are perpetuating the conflict because they are profiting from the violence.¹ Paul Biya (the incumbent president of Cameroon) was born in 1933 and has been in power since 1982. While there is a long history of false predictions of his death, it is ultimately inevitable. The likely change at the top of the government and the lack of an obvious clear successor adds to the tense security climate at the current time.

Our assessment is based on a qualitative analysis of historical and current events. We distill the fundamental changes driving a transition from stability to instability in Cameroon. We analyzed social media (primarily Twitter and Facebook), external reports, official documents, and academic papers. Our commentary is also based on fifteen years of experience of undertaking research interviews (with members of the Cameroonian military, political and administrative elites). Our analysis rests on three general realist propositions. First that security requires an effective government to manage internal order and international relations. Existing counterinsurgency research shows that state capacity is often the critical factor preventing political grievances from turning into insurgencies (Jensen 2016). Second, security requires a military to provide the force necessary for internal order and defense against external threats. However, post-colonial Africa has seen multiple military coups, so states also need to contain military power. State security in Africa is partly about the balance between a strong military to prevent insurgency

and strong institutions to check that military. Third, security requires national wealth to pay for the government, the military and to provide opportunities for citizens to achieve wellbeing. Wealth is a critical element of both military power and statecraft (Mearsheimer 2001).

We draw six key conclusions about Cameroon's security situation. First, we argue that Cameroon's government retains sufficient power to prevent the total collapse of the center (Map 1) in the near future. However, decreasing state capacity could render it incapable of preventing insurgencies in all other parts of Cameroon, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. The 'center' in this commentary refers both to a social group (the existing people who dominate and benefit from the state) and to a space we describe as '*le Grand Sud*' - an area that includes most of the South, Center, East, Littoral and part of the anglophone South-West Regions. This is contrasted with a periphery we call '*le Grand Nord*' which contains the remainder of the country including most of the West Region, the anglophone North-West region and part of the South-West. This way of imagining the country contrasts with standard accounts of Cameroon's regional geography that would emphasize the commonalities of the two anglophone regions and would treat the *Grand Nord* as just the three regions of Adamawa, North and Far North.

(PLACE MAP NEAR HERE)

Second, we argue that rural governance has changed fundamentally over decades and that change has accelerated over the last nine years. The modern state has expanded, and traditional institutions have lost authority. Third, we see a shift in the scale of the ethnicization of politics in Cameroon, with a transition from hundreds of small competing ethnic groups to a much smaller number of umbrella ethnic groups, potentially creating circumstances for ethnic domination and

majority-minority conflicts (Collier, Honohan, and Moene 2001). Fourth, the changing nature of the economy (especially the increasing number of jobs outside state control) challenges the state's ability to use appointments for political purposes – primarily to buy stability. Fifth, we argue that a long history of coup-proofing has profoundly weakened the military and reduced the counter-insurgency capability. Finally, the emerging multipolar international system increases Cameroon's diplomatic workload, making diplomatic errors more likely and making it harder for the state to keep a low international profile.

Therefore, we argue that these new circumstances undermine the past security strategy and risk re-orienting it towards protecting political-economic power in *le Grand Sud* (south) whilst allowing insurgencies to persist elsewhere. The commentary continues (Section II) by analyzing the means by which security in Cameroon was preserved in the past and therefore why there is the capacity for the center to hold in the future. In the subsequent part (Section III) we identify the contradictions and changes in the established system which will, we argue, lead to perpetual, peripheral insurgencies in Cameroon in the future.

The argument we present is distinct from existing academic accounts of security in Cameroon because it focuses on state security rather than human security. For example, there is valuable work on food security, crime and insecurity and human security (Orock 2014a; Essougong and Teguaia 2019; Fonjong and Gyapong 2021). However, there is less work from a more traditional realist state security perspective (Baker and Lekunze 2019; Lekunze 2019, 2020). Cameroonians experience individual security (albeit at costs around rights and development) if Cameroon is stable. The current situation in Cameroon's FN, NW, and SW attests to the burden of instability for the civilian population. Second, most existing security research tends to focus on a specific region or issue whereas we consider the country as a whole (Foyou et al 2018). Third,

we see the fundamental political cleavage in Cameroon not between anglophone and francophone or between Christian south and Muslim north but between *Grand Sud (center)* and *Grand Nord (periphery)*. Finally, contrary to accounts that highlight the risks of civil war across the nation (ICG 2010; Economist 2019; Egeland 2019; Fomunyoh 2022) we do not anticipate a national civil war, but more of a situation like Chad where the existing government continues to hold power in the political-economic center whilst there is a heightened risk of tolerating persistent insurgencies outside the center.

II Security in the past: why the center will hold in the future

This section analyses four dimensions through which security in Cameroon was sustained over three decades after 1982: military power, economic resources, institutional capabilities and deliberate security strategies. Taken together these are understood as ‘national power’ – the capacity of the nation-state to exert its will and ensure its own reproduction. After the 1984 coup attempt, the state established a formula combining these four dimensions designed primarily to preserve the status quo and the interests of those groups who benefitted from it. Building on the experience under President Ahidjo in the 1960s and 70s, the security model entailed: defining and dividing potential insurgents, using control of labor markets to buy off competitors, relentless coup-proofing and keeping a low profile internationally to prevent external interference (Kofele-Kale 1981; Azevedo 1987). This formula worked until 2013 when the Boko Haram insurgency in the Far North began to reveal its limits.

A. The Military

How did Cameroon's military provide security from 1984-2013? Over this period the military underpinned unarmed political institutions and was generally present and sufficient to maintain overall internal order despite limited quality. During internal security crises, the military stepped out of the background using force to support civilian systems and restore normalcy. Key factors concerning the effectiveness of the military relate to its size, funding, spatial distribution, fragmentation and capacity to respond swiftly to crises.

The Cameroon Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Camerounaises*), mostly known by its French acronym FAC, maintained a relatively effective basic security framework (Lekunze 2019). Estimates of the current size of the FAC vary however, the CIA uses forty thousand as the total number of active personnel. *Military Balance* estimates military spending at one per cent of Cameroon's GDP— this would be about 390 million US dollars in 2020 (a significant figure compared to several other African states) (IISS 2021). The military aspires to maintain a national presence. The bulk of the military personnel are in the Motorized Infantry Brigades, commonly known as BRIM (*Brigade Infanterie Motorisé*) who are present across the national territory, even in remote areas with a barracks near all major urban centers. The military is, however, deliberately fragmented. Cameroon has five 'combined military regions' (*Region Militaire Inter-Arme* (RMIA)). In effect, the RMIA's divide the armed forces into small regionally based sub-militaries with limited out-of-region capabilities. The RMIA commanders have no authority outside of their respective regions. The RMIA's operate under centralized command structures housed at the Presidency. As a result, most of the military is divided into small pieces that only the President (the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces) could combine to affect any serious action. The presidency deliberately fractures the military in order to reduce the risk of coups. Finally, the military includes one small, better trained and better equipped mobile brigade that can be rapidly

deployed to support civilian and less effective military and policing structures (Freudenthal and van der Weide 2020). The Rapid Intervention Brigade (*Brigade d'Intervention Rapide* BRIR) is the main counterinsurgency unit fighting against Boko Haram in the north, and against anglophone separatists in the NW and SW (ICG 2018a).²

To summarize: in the past the presence of the military across the national territory served as a political ‘firebreak’ stopping protests from gaining momentum by localizing threats and preventing nationwide reverberations. The early stages of most potential rebellions were generally quickly contained and extinguished by BRIM forces. Several rebellions in the 1990s in the North-West and West regions, for example, were prevented from having a national impact in this way. At the same time the military is fractured in order to prevent coups, so civilian leadership is likely to continue.

B. National Wealth

In the period under examination, Cameroon had the necessary national wealth to meet the costs of the military and other security expenditures. In terms of gross GDP (2020), Cameroon ranked 10th out of 46 sub-Saharan African states (despite having one of the smaller populations of that top ten).³ The Government of Cameroon has a sufficient economic base to fund the everyday functions of the administration and military. In addition to hydrocarbons, the country has a robust and diversified agribusiness base and several other exportable raw materials. Reports on the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) suggest that Cameroon has more potential than any other member state to grow intra-AfCFTA exports (doubling or tripling by 2035 with respect to the current baseline).⁴

Crucially, the president controls state income from oil and gas with little scrutiny. Cameroon developed a large timber export industry and oil/gas production in the 1970s and hydrocarbons are now estimated to account for around 46% of export income and timber 16%.⁵ President Biya only recently included hydrocarbon income into the national budget. Even now, the management of hydrocarbons remains within the opaque ‘sovereign budget’ (which covers the Presidency) (Gauthier and Zeufack 2011). The president’s close control of income from gas, oil and timber, allows him the freedom to pursue a national security strategy that prioritizes preserving the status quo and, in particular, allows control over key parts of the military. The geographical location of much of this wealth, most obviously the hydrocarbons, is within the *Grand Sud*, making it more likely that the center will be able to sustain itself economically in the future, while depriving potential rebels of access to wealth. Equally this spatial resource distribution reduces the economic need to control the whole territory, making peripheral rebellions economically tolerable.

C. Government Capacity

Between 1982 and 2013, Cameroon’s political order rested on five key government institutions/actors that acted together to enable the Cameroonian state to exert authority over its territory (Lekunze 2019). These actors are: customary institutions; the appointed modern state; the elected modern state; paramilitary and military structures. Understanding government capacity in Cameroon requires us to think through how these five actors worked together to prevent political grievances from turning into insurgencies in the past. The next section of the commentary will return to these arrangements to consider their internal contradictions and how they have changed in the last few years.

First, customary institutions, especially chieftaincy, provided a critical element in the state's capacity to preserve peace. Building on colonial practices, independent Cameroon established a hybrid of customary and 'modern' state actors: an administration with roots in pre-colonial Cameroon, which persisted through colonialism and into independence (Geschiere 1993; Fokwang 2009). The presidency is at the top of Cameroon's modern political system, and the president is the most important official within the system. The president is the head of state, armed forces, judiciary, and the ruling party and also formally 'chief of chiefs' (Lekunze 2019; Orock 2014b). Scholars have described the nature of Cameroon's presidency as a combination of attributes of a British-style Governor-General, a French Fifth Republic president and an American chief executive (Kofele-Kale 1981). However, none of these similes fully captures the customary aspect of Cameroon's presidency and its ideological significance.

Since independence the boundary between the modern state and customary institutions has been blurred. In terms of the modern state administration, the authority of the president cascades in a downward hierarchy from the Prime Minister, the Minister of Territorial Administration (central government), governors (regional government), prefects (divisional government), sub-prefects (sub-divisional government), and then into graded chiefs (traditional authorities). Chiefs exist in all parts of Cameroon and are technically answerable to the sub-prefect. However, this is complex: whilst a chief may formally be *under* a sub-prefect in the modern hierarchy, they have a different kind of authority, calling on 'tradition' to exert their influence and persuade citizens not to rebel. The auxiliary role of traditional authorities to the prefectural system, and their proximity to family heads, extends Cameroon's administrative system from the president right down to individual households (Lekunze 2019). Therefore, enabling the state to be present (though

indirectly) in all areas of its territory. Traditional legitimacy appeared to make the state's presence benign and locally legitimate.

Second, the creation of new local government institutions from the 1990s onwards absorbed popular demands for competitive democratic participation, thereby undermining protests and reinforcing the existing social order. These institutions include municipal councils with multi-party elected councilors and mayors in Sub-Divisional Councils and City Councils. Recently, Cameroon introduced Regional Councils and multi-party elected regional councilors as another additional layer of local government. All these organs have no authority or capabilities outside their respective municipality, city, or region. Expanding the elected state was a crucial strategy for quelling unrest in the 1990s.

Third, civilian administration (traditional, appointed and elected) relied on the support of the police and paramilitary (gendarmerie) to ensure stability. Different protocols governed what military action was officially legitimate *en temps normal* (in normal times) and *en temps de crise* (in crisis). When the unarmed actors failed to keep political order, military forces swiftly redressed the situation often acting with limited restraints. However, they also disengaged to allow normalcy to return – although the threat of their presence even when in their barracks was a powerful tool for asserting state power. The armed forces played a reactive role, thus, the frequent use of the words 'rapid' and 'intervention' in naming the outfits: *Batallion d'Intervention Rapid* (BIR), *Groupement Mobile d'Intervention* (GMI) and *L'Equipe Special d'Intervention Rapid* (ESIR). The gendarmes primarily focused on the rural and semi-urban areas, while the police (technically a civilian not a paramilitary force) focused on providing law and order in urban areas. There is a military camp not too far from all major population centers in Cameroon. Again, visible armed

forces give an impression of state power (regardless of their preparedness), preventing the onset of insurgencies.

In effect, government capacity in Cameroon is a product of three interlocking structures of these five actors: first, a civilian administration (the appointed modern state) that formally includes chiefs to ensure credibility and consent by reaching right down to local levels and right back to a deep past. Second, the elected civil administration of councils, city councils, and regional councils who accommodate popular desires for competitive politics and autonomy without actually challenging the ruling party's control at a national scale. Third, the military and paramilitary forces who are legally empowered to support civilian administrators and control the population using the state's monopoly over legitimate force.

The long period of relative political stability after independence is evidence of the established character of Cameroon's political institutions. The system withstood Ahidjo's consolidation of power (the establishment of an authoritarian regime) through the elimination of armed and unarmed opposition; a peaceful transfer of power from Ahidjo to Biya; an attempted *coup d'état* in 1984; widescale protests in the early 1990s (idiomatically known as the *années de braise*) and again in 2008; and the present insurgencies in the FN, SW and NW. In other words, the degree of government capacity in Cameroon has been sufficient for its security needs in the past despite significant challenges.

D. National Security Strategies

How did these Cameroonian actors, institutions, and finance combine to deliver national security in a complex threat environment over decades? Cameroon does not have a culture of

written national security strategy documents. Therefore, the strategies we outline here arise from an analysis of Cameroon's political history and interviews with relevant elites. Cameroon's overall organizational idea, 'conservative authoritarianism', gives clues to its two most important national security priorities: first, preservation of its existing political system and incumbent actors. Second, it also shows the willingness to use coercive force to achieve those priorities.

The first strategy was *define, divide, and rule*. The primary purpose of this strategy is to prevent mass mobilization for social or political change. Different ethnic identities (such as Bamoun or Fulani) are constantly defined and redefined by producing and reinforcing cultural differences. The state can then deal with regional elites as representatives of different ethnic groups (a form of vertical integration into a national superstructure) whilst simultaneously keeping those groups separate, (thereby preventing horizontal integration between individuals/groups who might otherwise identify their shared grievances and interests). This strategy divides Cameroon into many ethnic groups and regional identities who are all set in competition with each other (Nyamnjoh 1999). The *define, divide, and rule* strategy has its roots in pre-colonial and colonial governance (Jua 1995; Falola and Heaton 2008). Most major ethnic groups are associated with an administrative division - a territory. For example, Wouri Division is still a Duala space, despite the multi-ethnic nature of its residents. As a Cameroonian citizen your registered division of origin, even when you do not live there, is one of the most critical factors determining access to a job in the Cameroonian government.⁶

The second strategy was '*market control*'. The state still retains big stakes in major companies despite privatizations in the 1990s. For example, the Government of Cameroon owns 100% of CDC (the second biggest employer in the country), 44% of Eneo (the leading electricity supplier), and 43% of Cimencam (one of the largest building material producers). Controlling

markets has two primary security purposes. First, it maintains an elite support base by using appointments into the state as both reward and punishment for allies. Second, it denies the opposition the opportunity to fund political participation or an insurgency. The presidency still retains sufficient capacity to make or ruin an individual through allocating or withdrawing plum jobs in the government, state and parastatal enterprises and awarding commercial licenses (especially those for natural resource exploitation).

The third strategy was '*relentless coup-proofing*'. The primary purpose of this strategy is to prevent a military takeover. Cameroon has witnessed only one known coup attempt in the past 60 years of independence - and it was unsuccessful. Some coup-proofing strategies include: rewarding 'special loyalty' in the military (particularly for military leaders from the *Grand Sud*), fragmenting military command, allowing military equipment to atrophy, creating multiple military intelligence units and establishing a separate presidential security unit (*Sécurité Présidentielle SP*).⁷

The fourth strategy was to keep a low profile (*'un profil bas'*) in international relations. The primary purpose of this strategy is to prevent external interference in Cameroon's internal affairs, especially in relation to regime change. The *profil bas strategy* was relatively successful because Cameroon was rarely castigated by Washington, Paris, Moscow or Beijing, despite several potential opportunities for criticism (Terretta and Chétima 2018). Cameroon resolved its one high profile international issue (the boundary dispute with Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsula) through quiet diplomacy and recourse to international law (as well as a military presence backed by French airpower). As other countries made investments in Cameroon, an understanding of political non-interference becomes ever more entrenched. The tacit argument is that investors favor stability and, therefore, will support the preservation of the system and the incumbent actors - foreign

diplomats from investor nations are reminded of the merits of continuity for the security of their investments, for example.

Pulling these sections together can explain how the Government of Cameroon preserved stability and sustained national power over the last forty years. The three hybrid political structures we have presented (a civil administration combining modern and traditional officials; a military ready to provide force to back up the administration, and competitive democracy at a local level) interlock to provide the combination of consent and coercion required to contain dissent. The state is wealthy enough to pay for this arrangement to continue, the army is large enough to have a national presence, but it is not well resourced enough to represent a threat to the center. The opposition is divided, the military is neutered, regional elites are controlled by economic incentives, and potential international critics are placated and compromised by their investments. This system delivers for the elite, who only need to control the center in order to reproduce these advantages. The military has the capacity to prevent the periphery from threatening the center and is incentivized to do so both financially and ideologically since the military leadership is from the *Grand Sud*. The center still has sufficient national power to weather coming storms. The next section discusses how changes in Cameroon's security situation could lead to insecurity in its periphery.

III Security in the future and a shift to peripheral instability.

This section explains changes in Cameroon's security arrangements and situation since 2013 (when Cameroon became a major site within the Boko Haram conflict (ICG 2016)) and how they could lead to persistent peripheral insurgencies. We draw attention to five key changes that

have happened in Cameroon (the decline of rural governance, a shift in the pattern of ethnic competition, a reduced government capacity, the negative effects of coup-proofing and an emerging multipolar international system that undermines Cameroon's past diplomatic stance), which all point towards a shift to instability in the periphery. The contradictions inherent within the earlier period are causing problems in the present.

A. Declining capacity in rural governance.

Government capacity in rural and semi-rural of Cameroon is decreasing because of political decay in the institution of traditional authorities. From independence on, law and order in Cameroon's semi-rural and rural areas was the duty of both prefects and also chiefs (Lekunze 2019). However, in the 1990s, the Cameroonian government expanded the prefectures, creating more *Departements* (Divisions) and *Arrondissements* (Sub-Divisions) which inevitably reduced the duties of the chiefs. The government also introduced democratically elected councilors and mayors of rural municipal councils as permanent features of rural governance, again taking away work from chiefs.⁸

These new structures (especially the municipal councils) lack the chiefs' social authority and cultural legitimacy because of their relative novelty.⁹ Moreover, elections in rural areas could often produce leaders from the 'wrong' social class. While it was tolerated for the government to create new 'authorities' in the form of prefects (who were often not indigenes), local municipal elections upended the social order because they allowed indigenes from outside the traditional structures to claim authority. For example, through an election, a 'non-titled person' from an historically unimportant family could become a mayor with the authority to challenge the chief.¹⁰

The role of the chiefs (the old structures) was reduced *before* the councils (the new structures) were fully effective or legitimate so the overall ability to govern in many rural and semi-rural areas declined.

The institution of chieftaincy has largely collapsed in many parts of the South-West and North-West regions - a process that has accelerated sharply since 2016. The young and largely disenfranchised Ambazonian insurgents see the chiefs as traitors because they are part of the Government bureaucracy. Therefore, chiefs became legitimate targets in the eyes of insurgents both for kidnapping and violence, including execution (Bone and Nkwain 2021). Many chiefs fled from their palaces and re-located to secure sites either in Douala or Yaoundé, leaving the post vacant (Kindzeka 2018).

In the *Grand Nord*, a similar situation is emerging. Historically, religious leaders double as traditional authorities in the Adamawa, North and Far North regions.¹¹ Sufi Islam historically predominates in the Sahel region, including northern Cameroon (ICG 2005). However, Salafist preachers often allege that traditional Sufi authorities are too close to incumbent governments and, therefore, of doubtful spiritual authenticity. Salafists accuse African governments of corruption, secularism, and Westernization (ICG 2005) and have eroded the social authority of *Lamibe*, Sultans, and other traditional religious leaders in Cameroon. The decrease in the social capital of these leaders partly explains the persistence of Boko Haram in the Far North region.

In summary, political decay in key rural institutions has destabilized rural governance across the whole country. There is a significant contradiction between relying on traditional authorities to contribute to governance while simultaneously undermining those authorities first by introducing local councils in order to placate the population's demand for democracy and second by increasing the number of modern appointed officials in order to placate elite demands

for government jobs. In places where insurgencies have already occurred, the decline of these traditional authorities has been accelerated.

B. Changing geographies of ethnic alliance

Insurgencies are most likely in states with a significant majority ethnic group since that dominant group has the capacity and incentive to exploit minorities - and (as long as the demographic pattern remains the same) that condition is permanent (Collier, Honohan, and Moene 2001). In contrast, Cameroon has around 280 ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Bamiléké, with a population of around 1.2 million according to the last census (2005), or about 7% of the total population (Mbaku 2005; Debel and Pontié 2011). The small size of the ethnic groups and a deliberate policy of ‘regional representation’ (in which central government allocates posts to ethnic groups according to their size, prestige, and history) contributed to Cameroon’s political stability in the past. The bigger and more prestigious ethnic groups were given (or took) the more lucrative positions in central administration. All groups have a place in government, and small groups compete for a better place in government. Within each ethnic group, different elite factions compete to occupy the allocated government position. The result was a nation united by ethnic competition and difference (Nyamnjoh 1999; Ngeve and Orock 2012).

However, broader political alliances, or ‘umbrella groups’ based around ethnicity are emerging in Cameroon. Whilst small groups might be able to point to their distinctiveness from their neighbors, they can also describe what they have in common with their neighbors. The government practice of prioritizing bigger and historically prestigious groups for lucrative positions in the bureaucracy has unintentionally strengthened the incentive for different groups to

act together. For example, the Duala have enjoyed a prestigious ethnic identity since the Germans created Kamerun. They belong to a family of ethnic groups known as the Sawa. Therefore, because the Duala are Sawa, some peripheral groups such as the Bafaw or the Barondo, as far off as Meme and Ndian, are happy to identify as Sawa because of the political advantages of being of the same historical 'stock' as the Duala.

This process moves Cameroon towards a position where some umbrella ethnic groups could potentially compete to create a majority to dominate the rest, thus, creating a riskier conflict scenario. Two of these umbrella groups are at the center of current political debates: The Sawa-Beti-Pahuin alliance originates in the south (including in Yaoundé and Douala) and currently controls many of the key roles in the government, including in the military. For example the influential figures in the key RMIAS (1 & 2) covering Yaoundé, Douala, Limbe, Ebolowa and Bertoua are from the *Grand Sud* (Lekunze 2019). This coalition emerged because President Biya's own Beti group was insufficiently large to govern the state alone and needed allies. Alternatively, a Fulani-Bamoum-Bamiléké alliance might also potentially form a dominating ethnic coalition. The Bamiléké carry a sense of grievance, having been largely side-lined from national politics following the anti-colonial war of the 1950s, which, after independence, segued into a civil war running until the early 1970s (Terretta 2013). The Fulani have a sense of grievance having been side-lined from power after the presidential transition in 1982, and the violent purge of northerners from the leadership of the army after the coup attempt of 1984 (Azevedo 1987; Socpa 1999). The two groups could form an alliance on the basis of these shared grievances.

The animosity between emerging umbrella groups was the undercurrent of the 2018 post-election crisis (ICG 2018b). The president's principal opposition candidate, Maurice Kamto, is a Bamiléké from the West region. The *Battalion Anti-Sardinard* (BAS) is a protest movement

strongly opposed to President Biya whose members are overwhelmingly Bamiléké. ‘Sardinard’ is a derogatory term referring to the Beti-Pahuin population, insinuating that President Biya buys their blind loyalty with tins of sardines. The BAS, whose activities and financing extend into the diaspora, successfully hounded the President out of his ‘second home’ in the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva in 2019. Future political conflicts might emerge from the Sawa-Beti-Pahuin alliance’s belief that they are entitled to ‘own’ the presidency. This combines with the sense that key cities and economic sites (Map 1) are on ‘their’ indigenous territory and therefore *belong* to them. These ethnic alliances have the potential to disturb old assumptions about Cameroonian stability.

Urbanization is also changing Cameroon’s ethnic mosaic. The population of Cameroon has more than doubled since 2000.¹² Urbanization fosters the emergence of Cameroonian national and urban identities outside of ethnic identities, despite the central government’s deliberate efforts to maintain ethnic divisions (Ndjio 2006).¹³ Desertification in the north, conflict in Chad, CAR, Nigeria, FN, NW, and SW increases the number of refugees and IDPs in urban Cameroon, challenging the efficacy of a geographically organized system of regional balance that relies on keeping the population in specific ethnically defined identities and locations.¹⁴

In summary, a shift in the pattern of ethnic competition away from several hundred small ethnic groups towards a few ethnic umbrella blocs increases the risk of violence. These two blocs are coincident with the geographical divide we present of the *Grand Sud* and the *Grand Nord* further suggesting that this is the fundamental cleavage in Cameroonian politics. In addition, the increase in the urban population undermines the past strategy of ‘regional balance’ by weakening ethnic identities.

C. The challenge of sustaining *market control*

Recent changes to the structure of the administration place the market-control strategy at risk. Since independence, Cameroon performed better in GDP per capita than many of its peers in West Africa, like Ghana and Ivory Coast.¹⁵ However, from around 2010, Cameroon's GDP per capita has grown at a much slower rate, allowing peers to catch up and overtake. The interviews suggest widespread disillusionment as a result of a lack of appointments in the administration, low wages, delayed or unpaid salary arrears and poor access to pensions.¹⁶ Expanding education has increased the number of individuals who meet the criteria for appointment into senior government roles. However, the number of positions the government can offer is falling because people manipulate the system to postpone their retirement; parastatals have been privatized; and external controls have been placed on expanding the administration.¹⁷ The individuals who are doing all it takes to be appointed into lucrative government positions but are not appointed become disgruntled and are ready to sabotage the system, not because they want to change it out of principle, but because it does not benefit them.¹⁸ Additionally, the number of Cameroonians with incomes not associated with the Cameroonian state is increasing, undermining the market control strategy. The privatizations of the 1990s, significant emigration, and the expanding digital economy created a growing middle class with reduced dependence on the state.

Not only does the state have fewer appointments to disburse in order to buy off dissent, but other actors have more access to money to foment it. For example, the Cameroonian diaspora, which from the relative safety of foreign spaces, may have the resources and inclination to provide insurgents with means for an armed struggle (Mandaville and Lyons 2012; Enoh 2014). The diaspora also provides charismatic leadership, free from repression at home. The internet makes their physical distance from Cameroon irrelevant, which partly explains the Government's

determination to shut down the internet in the anglophone regions for much of 2017 (Marchant and Stremlau 2019). Meanwhile existing conflicts in the periphery have shown that insurgents have found the means to raise money locally too (through kidnapping, cattle theft, control of the marijuana trade).

In summary despite the availability of money to the Presidency from gas revenues, the capacity of the government to buy stability at a national scale is reduced by the reduced number of lucrative government positions, while the capacity of insurgents to buy dissent is increased. The likely consequence is that in the future the government will not be able to prevent political entrepreneurs from fomenting insurgency. Economic and ethnic interests will push the government to focus more narrowly onto rewarding the population of *the Grand Sud* and perpetuating their influence within that more limited space.

D. The negative effects of coup-proofing

The unrelenting commitment to coup-proofing has ultimately raised questions about the state's military capacity for counter-insurgency. Cameroon's coup-proofing strategy deliberately allows atrophy in the military, which has various consequences. First, training and conditions are poor, pay is low, many troops are very young, and discipline is weak. Many of the verified acts of military abuse recorded by human rights organizations in recent years could be explained (though not excused) by the lack of military competence as well as by a culture of impunity.¹⁹ Second, since most of the military has limited funding, much of its equipment is second-hand, imported from Europe and Asia. Third, the strategy of appointing individuals with 'special loyalties to the president' (principally based on ethnic allegiances) to senior military positions undermines merit

as the basis of promotion. Though the BRIR is more effective and better equipped, it is only one brigade. The overall military, which includes all other brigades, divisions, and corps, has low levels of competence. In addition, the challenges of counter-insurgency are compounded by: Cameroon's physical geography, which provides insurgents with several opportunities conducive for a guerrilla war; the lack of transport infrastructure in the periphery (many road bridges, for example, are too weak to allow troop carriers to cross) and fluid international borders providing access to small-arms and sanctuary for insurgents. Coup-proofing has had the unintended consequence of undermining security in the periphery.

E. Diplomacy in a multipolar world.

Maintaining a low international profile in a region with several high-profile security challenges is increasingly difficult. For example, Cameroon's northern region links it to the Sahel and the global war on terror. Cameroon was widely criticized for allowing Boko Haram to use the FN as a forward base before 2013 as part of a deal to reduce Islamist activity within Cameroonian territory. Again, international diplomats saw Cameroon's response to the crisis in CAR as disappointing. Cameroon is at the core of the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), the most dangerous maritime region globally in 2020 (in terms of pirate attacks) and yet has taken little meaningful action.²⁰ *'Profil bas'* increasingly looks like indifference, if not negligence, on the global stage in such circumstances.

Furthermore, the multipolar competitive international system increases the labor involved in keeping a low international profile. Emollient diplomacy in just Paris and Washington is no longer sufficient. As more powers are potentially interested in Cameroon so diplomacy is needed

in Beijing, Moscow, Pretoria, London, and Ankara too. The increased diplomatic workload increases the risk of strategic mistakes. Disagreements between the ‘great powers’ make it more challenging to achieve alignment with all of them simultaneously. It would only take one great power to support an insurgency in Cameroon to threaten the country’s stability. With many political grievances and more influential powers in the global system, the possibility of finding a foreign power that wishes the current regime ill increases.

IV Conclusion

Cameroon is waiting; it is a stationary state (Eboko and Awondo 2018). But underneath the stasis there have been multiple changes, often the consequence of the contradictions of earlier political strategies (relying on chiefs but expanding local government; relying on the army but denying them resources; relying on ethnic divisions but promoting Cameroon as united and indivisible). These are the changes we have explained in this commentary (in rural governance, ethnic alliances, government appointments, diplomatic contexts, and military power). So, what will happen when President Biya finally hands over to a successor? We think the model for the future of Cameroon is the pseudo-monarchical models emerging in Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Republic of the Congo. This would entail the ascendance of Franck Biya (or another relative of the presidential couple) to the Presidency, and a strategic focus on retaining full control over the portion of the country we have described as the *Grand Sud* – the Center, the South, the Littoral and parts of the East and the South-West regions. This area contains both the main cities, the key assets associated with the hydrocarbon industry, much of the forestry sector and the agro-industrial sector. It also includes the emerging assets of iron ore (in the South) and diamonds (in the East).

The changes identified make the possibility of continuing into the future in the same way as the past across the whole national space unlikely outside this central zone, so we predict an area of perpetual regional insurgencies. The capacity of the state to ensure effective counter-insurgency across the whole national space is limited both by military weakness in the armed forces and years of neglect of the national infrastructure. However, contrary to the predictions of others, we do not foresee generalized civil war at a national scale because the state has sufficient national power to hold the center, and through consent or force will retain power over this space. In this sense we argue that key political cleavage in Cameroon is not that between anglophone and francophone, nor that between Christian south and Muslim north, but between the *Grand nord* and *Grand sud*. The Beti-Pahuin-Sawa alliance will secure the politically and economically important parts of the south by capitalizing on a long history of colonial advantage, the spatial concentration of economic assets and the southern leadership over the best equipped parts of the army. Outside this zone they may not have sufficient capacity to exert their will – as is already demonstrated by current insurgencies.

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¹ Interview: Contract Supplier, June 2022; NGO staff, June 2022.

² The BRIR Brigade is made up of seven *Battalions d'Intervention Rapide (BIR)* so we estimate the total number of soldiers to be around 7,000.

³ World Bank Data:

https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=ZG&most_recent_value_desc=true

⁴ Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/the-african-continental-free-trade-area>

⁵ <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/cameroon-market-overview>

⁶ Senior government official discussing Cameroon's regional representation policy.

⁷ The *Sécurité Présidentielle* is not the same as the Presidential Guard. It is a plain-clothes unit within the Presidential Guard professing personal loyalty to the current president.

⁸ Interview: Chief A, Mayor L1 and L2 September 2018.

⁹ Interview: Chiefs A, B and C and DO-A August 2015

¹⁰ Interview: Chief A, Mayor L1 and L2 September 2018.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² World Bank Data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=CM>

¹³ Interview: Senior Government Official DL1, September 2018

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ World Bank Data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CM>:

¹⁶ Multiple participants have made this point during interviews.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Interview: Academic, Douala, August 2018

¹⁹ Interview with several serving military, police, and gendarmerie officers.

²⁰ According to the International Maritime Bureaux: <https://iccwbo.org/media-wall/news-speeches/gulf-of-guinea-remains-worlds-piracy-hotspot-in-2021-according-to-imbs-latest-figures/>