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Cameroun: a new hot spot?

If Cameroun's governmental and security matters have never drawn much international attention, lately things have changed. At the beginning of the year, the International Crisis Group included the country in its annual early-warning report that tracks conflicts arising worldwide [*Watch List 2018*, International Crisis Group, January 31, 2018] and, at the end of May, The Washington Post published a research article alarmingly titled “*Africa's next civil war could be in Cameroon*”.

Indeed, from being quite an anomaly of resilient stability in Central Africa – notably a region affected by political volatility, armed conflicts and humanitarian crisis – Cameroun ended up facing insecurity on multiple fronts in just a few years. In the Far North in the territories bordering the Lake Chad, Boko Haram has been carrying out attacks since 2014, displacing approximately 241.000 people internally; the country's western borders have been crossed by 90.000 Nigerians escaping from the same terrorist threat at home and another refugee crisis is occurring in the East, where almost 250.000 people from the neighbouring Central African Republic have been forced to flee CAR militia's violence into Cameroun [UNHCR, *Cameroon Fact Sheet*, March 2018]. To be added to this turbulent scenario is the so-called Anglophone crisis: the one potential trigger that could definitely jeopardize the national unity.

Since October 2016, the two English-speaking regions accounting for the 20% of the country's population – Northwest and Southwest – have been agitated by sectoral protests and strikes that rapidly turned into a large-scale uprising against the French-speaking majority, accused of marginalising economically and politically the Anglophone groups. This is actually a deep-rooted issue in the country's history: since the independence of the former British and French territories in 1960/1961 and their unification into modern Cameroun, an effective federal system that would respect cultural differences have failed to be put in place and the government (expression of the Francophone majority) realized a short-sighted reunification based on assimilation and centralisation.

Thus not surprisingly it took less than a year for the initial low-intensity unrest to become an open conflict between protestors and security forces: the central administration first ignored and then criminalised the movement, violently repressing the demonstrations and arresting Anglophone leaders. In response, a radicalisation of the early demands led some fringes of the English-speaking masses to arm themselves, claim for secession and kidnap or kill enemy officials.

Nowadays violence continues to intensify and the conflict's casualties account for 100 civilians, more than 40 members of security forces and an unspecified number of armed militants. Due to the swift escalation of the crisis, even the US ambassador to Cameroun, Peter Henry Barlerin, has intervened denouncing the abuses of both factions. It is the first time that a foreign diplomat takes an explicit stand about these clashes: what repercussions could have this internal conflict on US-France relationships?

In the meantime, the country's presidential elections are set for October 2018 and their outcome will be crucial in assessing the fate of national unity. Cameroun is in need of change: only a reorganisation of the administration in order to include and reflect the importance of Anglophones, an improvement of decentralisation laws and a better regional distribution of resources will ease the tensions. If president Paul Biya, in charge since 1982, will be reconfirmed, none of this is likely to happen and his regime could be further disrupted by force and civil rebellion.

Sofia Mastrostefano – *Master's Degree in Philosophy at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University of Milan. Diploma in Geopolitics and Global Security at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies – ISPI.*