



Statement

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International Crisis Group

# Cameroon: Proposed Anglophone General Conference Deserves National and International Support

*Following the deaths of at least 400 civilians over the past year in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, an Anglophone community conference scheduled for 21 and 22 November 2018 could offer a decisive breakthrough. To succeed, international powers should encourage buy-in from separatist and government leaders alike.*

International Crisis Group commends the initiative of four religious leaders (from the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Central Mosques of Bamenda and Buea) to organise an Anglophone General Conference in Buea, a city in Cameroon's Southwest region. In April 2018, Crisis Group proposed the Catholic Church as a potential mediator in the ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest). On 25 July, Cardinal emeritus Christian Tumi announced that this conference would take place on 29 and 30 August 2018. The organisers later postponed it to 21 and 22 November. This delay is welcome as it allows for better preparation and could help ensure that all parties concerned participate.

The communiqué convening the conference calls on the president of the Republic to initiate a substantive national dialogue on the Anglophone question as soon as possible. It portrays the conference as a preparatory phase amongst Anglophones with the aim of identifying the issues that a future national dialogue would address and allowing that community to nominate representatives for such a dialogue. The conference could enable Anglophones to adopt a common position, or at least minimise their differences.

For it to be successful, the organisers will have to persuade the government to allow Anglophones in the diaspora (including separatists) to return to the country without risking arrest and to release detained Anglophone activists. A meaningful dialogue is not possible without the separatists, given their political importance and the security threat they pose. The organisers also have to convince separatists that attending the conference would reinforce their legitimacy among Anglophones.

This initiative requires foreign support. International actors should exert pressure on both the government and separatists in equal measure. Since most separatist leaders fuelling the armed struggle are based in the diaspora, they would likely be sensitive to such pressure. Some separatists may not heed these calls. But with violence increasing, it is vital to do everything possible to persuade as many as possible to present their views alongside those of other Anglophones in the hope of reaching a compromise.

The conference is an important opportunity to restore confidence among the different Anglophone movements and establish conditions for a national dialogue on the Anglophone question after the October 2018 presidential election. Over the last year, the conflict in the

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Anglophone regions has caused the deaths of at least 400 civilians, 170 military and police officers and hundreds of separatists, with more 250 security officials wounded. Armed separatist groups are now more than 1,000 fighters strong and control large rural areas and a number of main roads. According to the UN, by September more than 180,000 people are displaced in the Northwest and Southwest, and by mid-August 25,085 have fled the violence to Nigeria. The crisis has recently taken a particularly worrying turn as both parties appear to be targeting the population, pro-government militias are forming and, alongside more than ten armed separatist groups, many small criminal groups are emerging.

### **Perceptions and stakeholders**

It is far from certain that the Anglophone General Conference will take place. Although most Anglophones, pro-federalism leaders, proponents of decentralisation and members of civil society seem to be in favour, the government and Anglophone separatist leaders are resistant.

Holding a productive conference requires government authorisation and support. Although the government has not officially rejected the proposal, its spokesperson has questioned Cardinal Tumi’s impartiality and rejected the confidence-building measures the organisers have proposed, notably a ceasefire, the release of Anglophone militants and the participation of separatists.

This attitude reflects the government’s reliance on military force and its hope of wiping out armed groups before the election. In addition to stepping up security, Yaoundé has, over the past few months, encouraged the creation of pro-government “self-defence” militias and fuelled divisions between Anglophones of the Northwest and those of the Southwest with the goal of driving a wedge between the

Anglophone population and the separatists. The most cynical officials see no interest in holding elections in the Anglophone regions, which have always been an opposition stronghold. The support that France has recently shown to President Biya has reinforced his perception that this approach is effective.

Such a posture is counterproductive. Prohibiting the conference or obstructing its smooth running would damage the government’s image both at home and abroad, reinforce the view that it opposes dialogue and bolster the credibility of separatists and armed groups in the eyes of the Anglophone population and international partners. In the longer term, blocking the conference, repressing separatists and incarcerating more moderate Anglophones risks preparing the ground for a devastating civil war that would threaten the entire country’s stability and the government’s own survival. Attacks since last July in Francophone West and Littoral regions and separatists’ demands and threats that Francophones leave Anglophone regions underscore this risk. The security apparatus is already under pressure as defections of soldiers increase in Anglophone areas, with more than twenty defectors joining separatist groups.

Since the crisis started in October 2016, many Anglophone activists have been detained for political reasons. Some are suspected of supporting armed groups. Some have already been convicted while others are either being tried or are awaiting trial. These detainees are a major stumbling block to the peaceful settlement of this conflict, which requires at a minimum the release of those who neither incited nor committed acts of violence.

The government should wrong-foot separatist leaders by supporting the conference, publicly acknowledging its worth, providing logistical support and security, and permitting the diaspora to take part. The conference may allow the government to identify credible interlocutors for a national dialogue on the Anglophone question after the election.

For their part, separatist leaders seem firmly opposed to the conference. The losses they have

inflicted on the military and what they perceive as recent diplomatic progress have strengthened their resolve. For example, two briefings took place in the U.S. Congress in June on the Anglophone crisis and Boko Haram. The same month, over 50 German members of parliament called on their government to review economic aid to Cameroon and sanction human rights violators if the Anglophone crisis escalates. Separatists in the diaspora may also fear losing ground to the Anglophone activists residing in the country if the conference goes ahead.

However, it is in the separatist leaders' interest to take part. Refusing to do so could tarnish them, in the eyes of international actors, as hostile to dialogue and a peaceful settlement

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of the conflict. They could also lose the sympathy of the population. Like the government, separatists risk dragging the country into a civil war that neither side would win and which would cause enormous civilian suffering. In contrast, attending the conference could allow them to begin negotiating an amnesty. If they obtain the release of Anglophone militants, or at least the main leaders, they would gain more credibility among Anglophones. In return, they would have to commit to respecting a ceasefire as conference organisers request.

### **Making the conference a success**

For the conference to take place successfully, the government and separatist leaders must first moderate their positions. If they refuse to do so, Cameroon's international partners should pressure the two parties. Non-separatist Anglophone leaders should throw their weight more forcefully behind the initiative.

### *What Cardinal Tumi and his team should do*

The conference organisers should immediately start direct negotiations with the government, separatist groups and other Anglophone activists. If possible, they should involve Cameroon's international partners. Cardinal Tumi and his team should make arrangements for the various parties to attend, for example, by ensuring that representatives of Anglophone activists in the diaspora can return to Cameroon. They should also involve the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon and Anglophone bishops throughout the process.

Secondly, if the government authorises the conference, the organisers will need to prepare a format that enables productive discussions. Their plan to involve all components of Anglophone society is commendable in that it would give more legitimacy to the conference's resolutions and to the individuals chosen to represent Anglophones at a prospective national dialogue. But organisers should factor in that broad participation will complicate decision-making and create space for smaller group discussions in order to reach consensus on key issues.

### *What Anglophone non-separatists and the civil society should do*

The conference is an opportunity for Anglophone civil society, elected representatives, pro-federalism leaders and proponents of decentralisation to be heard. Although most of them favour the conference, they have yet to express strong support. They should assume greater responsibility for mobilising the Anglophone population to promote the conference.

Anglophone elected representatives, government officials and members of the National Commission on the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (created in January 2018 by President Biya in response to the Anglophone crisis) should also lobby the president in favour of this conference. This would help them regain credibility among Anglophones, many of whom view them as allies of Francophone

domination rather than defenders of their community. Likewise, Francophone opposition and civil society leaders should support the actions of their Anglophone counterparts.

*What Cameroon's international partners should do*

Cameroon's international partners, notably the U.S., France, the European Union, the Vatican and the African Union, should support the conference as a potential first step toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict. To this end, they could clearly state that any obstruction or

refusal to participate in the conference could lead to sanctions against any individuals hindering peace, whether government or separatist, and a reappraisal of security cooperation with Cameroon. Such measures would in any case already be justified by the abuses both sides have committed against civilians.