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A middle-aged man stands in front of a freshly covered grave, a flag tied around his neck. The flag has blue and white stripes and a white dove in its top left quadrant, but these are not the colours of any country recognised by the United Nations.

That is something this man and thousands like him in the two western English-speaking regions of Cameroon want to change. They are agitating for secession, and the creation of a brand-new country called the Republic of Ambazonia.

The grave contains the body of a young man shot dead by security forces on 8 December in Bamenda, the largest city in Cameroon's Northwest Region. He was one of four people who died that day, as they demanded the rolling back of French influence.

"Innocent southern Cameroonians (a reference to the pre-independence name of the two Anglophone regions: Southern Cameroons) went out to the streets to complain, without weapons: no guns no bullets. But here is our younger brother, lying here," he says to a group of men paying their respects at the graveside.

"The time is now. Our independence is our inherent right," he says. "We are calling on the United Nations and all African heads of state [to support us]. Brothers, go back to Bamenda safely. Tomorrow, a new fight is starting."

There's a collective yell of "forward ever, backward never", and the men troop out of the cemetery in Kumbo, the second-largest city in Northwest Region.

## **"Swamped"**

Cameroon is a bilingual country; the constitution gives equal status to both English and French. But Cameroon's two English-speaking regions, Northwest and Southwest, are seething over their perceived marginalisation, swamped by Cameroon's eight other regions and majority French-speaking population.



They believe they are treated as second-class citizens, and over the past few months there has been a series of demonstrations in defence of their language and culture.

The movement began as protests by lawyers and teachers in October, striking over the increasing use of French in courts and schools. It has since snowballed.

Clashes with the security forces in Bamenda on 21 November left one person dead and more than 100 arrested. Students supporting the strikers at the University of Buea, the largest English-speaking university in the country, were teargassed and beaten on 28 November, with images of the violence **going viral** on social media.

The discontent, known as the “Anglophone problem”, has been bubbling since the 1990s. It is fanned by the perceived lack of benefits earned from the oil produced in the region; the government’s failure to appoint English-speaking Cameroonians (with the exception of the prime minister) to senior positions; and the difficulty faced in the job market by those for whom French is not their first language.

## **“Excessive force”**

Paul Atanga Nji, the minister of special duties at the presidency, denies there is a systemic problem. In what was seen as a provocation in the heated political atmosphere, he decided to hold a rally of the ruling CPDM in Bamenda on 8 December.

It went badly. Protesters blocked the roads to the city. They stopped everyone they found wearing CPDM colours, stripped them, and set their clothes on fire. They pulled down the Cameroonian flag on administrative buildings and hoisted the secessionist southern Cameroon flag.

Atanga’s car was torched, and he was forced to seek refuge in a nearby hospital as a military helicopter flew to his rescue. Other politicians had to be rushed out of the venue, escorted by soldiers mounted on pickup trucks firing into the air.

Police and soldiers used what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights described as “excessive force”. Among their victims was a 12-year-old boy, shot while fetching water from a public tap.

The government, though, has characterised the protesters as quasi-terrorists. According to press reports, some 100 people arrested in Bamenda have been flown to 101 Military Base in the capital, Yaoundé, and are currently being held in an undisclosed location.

They could face the death penalty if tried under Cameroon’s controversial anti-terrorism law, enacted in the wake of Boko Haram attacks in the country’s Far North Region.

Government spokesman Issa Tchiroma Bakary said at the weekend that the comparison with Boko Haram was apt. He said security forces had been confronting a well-planned act of urban guerrilla warfare, while the raising of the Southern Cameroons flag was insurrectionary.

## **Call for investigations**

But Amnesty International has urged the government to immediately conduct “thorough, impartial and effective investigations”, into the actions by the security forces.

“Responding to incidents of violence during protests with unnecessary or excessive force threatens to further enflame an already tense situation and could put more lives at risk,” Amnesty said in a statement.

Southern Cameroons was under British colonial rule at the end of World War I, and administered as part of neighbouring Nigeria. In a referendum in 1961 it chose to join French Cameroon, and the two territories were formally united.

The men at the graveside in Kumbo, and other secessionists, represent the hardline option. The more mainstream position in western Cameroon is for federation, returning to a system of governance that existed from independence until 1972.

## **No dialogue**

The Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, made up primarily of lawyers and teachers involved in the strike action, are among the groups pushing for the federal option, so far with little success.

Ayah Paul Abine, an opposition politician and the lone Anglophone among five advocates-general on Cameroon's Supreme Court, is putting together a list of eminent leaders to negotiate with the government.

“We will dialogue with the government to have federalism, and if we can't have that, both Cameroons will go their separate ways,” he told IRIN.

But the depth of anger in western Cameroon has so far been best expressed by Member of Parliament Wirba Joseph, who made an impassioned speech to the national assembly that has become a local internet sensation.

Furious over the actions of what he described as an “army of occupation”, he announced, “those saying that we should break Cameroon are right”.

Quoting a phrase often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, he added: “When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty.”

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