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by Chris W. J. Roberts
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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NAFTA, pipelines, refugees, a new UN peacekeeping mission in Mali and an ongoing campaign for a UN Security Council seat – could a simmering crisis in Cameroon disrupt the prime minister's already crowded crisis agenda heading into a busy fall?

“**W**here's Biafra?” Canada's new prime minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau (PET), infamously quipped to reporters in August 1968. As Granatstein and Bothwell pointed out in their 1990 book on PET's foreign policy, *Pirouette*, “The answer was juridically correct, but politically horrendous, since it implied arrogance, indifference, and ignorance to the television audience.” Images of starving children, many with stomachs bloated, had just started to emerge in the North American mass media. The July 12, 1968 cover story (“Starving Children of the Biafra War”) in the then-ubiquitous weekly magazine *Life* brought the horror directly into North American homes and waiting rooms. Stanley Burke, CBC's national news anchor and experienced war correspondent, became so enthralled and enraged by the plight of Biafra that he left the anchor desk in 1969 to work on humanitarian relief and peace efforts. The year before, journalist (later, famous novelist) Frederick Forsyth left the BBC to cover the war on his own after being told the BBC wasn't interested in Biafra. Fifty years later, emerging questions about Canada's attitude towards Ambazonia (the self-declared republic in western Cameroon) – given [growing reports of violence](#) (including [sexual violence](#)) and [mass displacement](#) plus shocking videos and photos on social media – could emerge as Justin Trudeau's Biafra this fall.

Canada and Biafra

Biafra became PET's [first foreign policy crisis](#) and the precedent for public humanitarian mobilization in the television age. While the Nigerian civil war started a year previously on then-prime minister Lester Pearson's watch, barely a ripple had reached the Canadian public until the summer of 1968. Overshadowed by the U.S. war in Vietnam, by March 1968 the Nigerian war had turned into a humanitarian crisis with secessionist Biafra (in the southeast) cut off by land and sea. As Arua Oko Omaka's [recent book](#) details, European and North American humanitarian aid groups (eventually including [Canairelief](#)) mobilized to raise attention, funds and aircraft to [support emergency food and medical relief efforts](#), mostly co-ordinated under the auspices of Joint Church Aid (quickly dubbed “Jesus Christ Airlines”). Through public campaigns and direct political pressure, aid groups and other Biafran supporters forced the conflict onto the government's agenda.

Ottawa's response to the brutal war eating away its Commonwealth colleague and top African aid recipient was complicated and constrained by federal-Quebec and related Ottawa-Paris rivalry, as well as those Commonwealth ties. Despite some diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives, including Canadian participation in [Observer Team Nigeria](#), those over-riding concerns shaped Canada's unwillingness to either recognize the break-away state of Biafra, a long shot in any event, or publicly spearhead some type of international diplomatic intervention to at least curtail the violence. This hands-off attitude was particularly but not solely directed at Gaullist France, which



seemed to be stoking Québécois nationalism while actively supporting the Biafrans. The consequences and risks of recognizing Nigeria's Eastern Region as the new state of Biafra therefore appeared obvious in the late 1960s, right at the time PET introduced the *Official Languages Act* (1969). The failure of Nigerian federalism – however badly designed and manipulated by the British colonial authorities before 1960, and subsequently disrupted by two military coups in 1966 and pogroms against the eastern Igbos over 1966-1967 – might well have provided international and domestic political precedents for Québécois nationalists and their Gaullist supporters. If the international community had earlier (1960-1964) held Congo together despite deep regional cleavages plus Cold War and imperial machinations, Nigeria looked to be a more straightforward case of “holding together”. Yet the Nigerian state's dysfunction produced a period of ethnic violence and displacement directed at Igbos around the country, which led to the attempted secession. Without massive military assistance from a strange amalgam of Cold War enemies (most notably the U.K. and the USSR), Nigeria's military government would not have been able to overcome [Biafra's ragtag but determined army](#) and its mercenary supporters.

From Biafra to Ambazonia

So, what does any of this have to do with contemporary Canada or Justin Trudeau? Today, raging just across the eastern border of Nigeria is an escalating conflict with Biafra-like overtones. (It should be noted there is a [resurgent Biafra movement](#) in eastern Nigeria too, given lingering economic and governance problems facing Africa's most populous nation – another reason for the growing number of Nigerian refugee claimants in Canada). Western Cameroon is degenerating rapidly; groups long upset with the central government in Yaoundé refer to it variously as Ambazonia, Amba Land or Southern Cameroons. Like Canada and only a handful of other countries, Cameroon is a member of both the Francophonie and the Commonwealth: French is the dominant European language but 20 per cent of the country has an Anglophone colonial heritage. Western Cameroon was a British trusteeship after the old German colony was divided between Britain and France at the end of the First World War. English and French are thus the country's two official languages. Many people use Kamtok (pidgin English, variants of which pre-date even the German imperial presence) to converse across a country with more than 200 Indigenous languages.

Shortly after independence and the amalgamation of British Southern Cameroons with (ex-French) Cameroun in October 1961 – the only other option on the table was to be swallowed up by Nigeria – rumblings of Anglophone marginalization began to surface. Political infighting in the region played into the hands of Yaoundé's centralizing predilection, with resignation turning to consternation when a hastily organized referendum eliminated the last rudiments of a [shadow federal system](#) in 1972. A [detailed timeline](#) (from an Ambazonian perspective) and a 2014 [report](#) from Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board on the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and Youth League (SCYL) provides some of that history.



The current period of escalating violence and displacement began in October 2016 when students and common-law lawyers in the west went on strike, protesting against the continuing imposition of [French-speaking teachers and civil code judges](#), and security forces clamped down. Ambazonia “Defence”, “Liberation” and “Restoration” forces subsequently sprang up to push back against the security forces and enforce school boycotts (sometimes burning schools down), and [a small-scale insurgency](#) developed. By late 2017 a collection of groups self-declared a “Republic of Ambazonia” which brought even more harsh reaction by security forces and regular [shutdowns of internet and cellular](#) service in the west. Ambazonian groups have turned to [online crowdfunding](#) for weapons and food. In January 2018 [Nigeria arrested and extradited leaders of the movement](#) (called “terrorists” by the Cameroon government), and they and others, including journalists and editors, remain in custody. By May 2018, the [UN reported that](#) over 20,000 Cameroonians had fled across the border to Nigeria (perhaps over 50,000), and another 160,000 were internally displaced. [Human Rights Watch](#) issued a damning report in July 2018, identifying “grave abuses against residents” by both the security and Amba forces. By mid-September 2018, with a dusk-to-dawn curfew in effect, [so many were fleeing the cities and towns](#) in the southwest and northwest regions that government officials imposed what effectively is an internal visa process, with westerners having to apply for permission to leave. In the [New York Times](#) on Sept. 15, best-selling Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie published “The Carnage of the Cameroons” which may introduce the crisis into mainstream North American consciousness, just as *Life* magazine did for Biafra in July 1968.

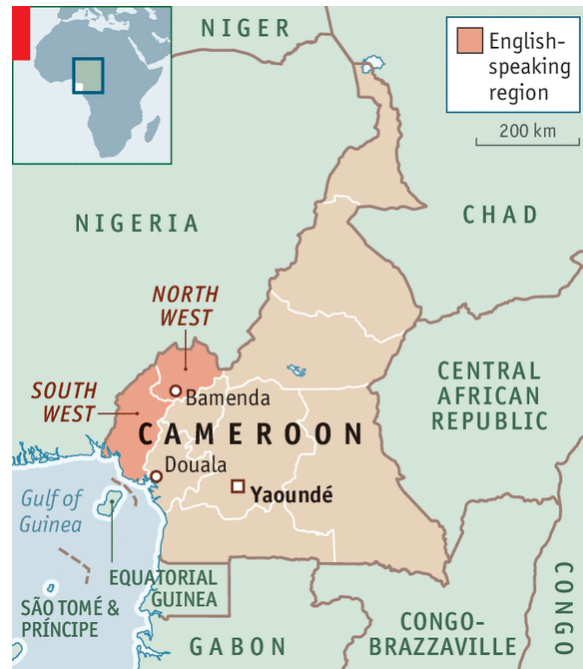


Figure 1: A map illustrating the geographic composition of Cameroon's English-speaking population. (Source: The Economist)

So where's the Canadian connection? Cameroon is Canada's oldest diplomatic and development relationship in francophone Africa: Canada's first embassy in an ex-French colony went to Yaoundé in 1962, not the more expected Dakar (Senegal) or Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). PET himself became friends with literary scholar and educator Bernard Fonlon, a leading proponent of bilingual education in Cameroon who was invited to appear before the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the 1960s. The African Literature Association's prestigious annual [Fonlon-Nichols Award](#) is co-named after Fonlon, who died of pneumonia during a visit to Ontario in 1986. At the award's inception, the University of Alberta provided a matching grant.

In the latter half of the 1960s, and at various points since, Cameroon regularly reached the top seven of Canadian debt relief or aid recipients on the continent. A recent sample of Canadian-funded or executed health projects is [available here](#). In 2006, Canada wrote off \$220 million in debt, placing Cameroon as the top Canadian development partner in Africa that year. Nearly



2,000 Cameroonians come to Canada for education annually, and a growing diaspora community has set up [various organizations](#) across the country. As part of its effort to promote Cameroon as one of only 14 “priority markets” in Africa, Canada signed a [Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement](#) with Cameroon in March 2014, which went into effect in December 2016. The first Canada-Cameroon Air Transport Agreement followed in December 2017. A Canadian-based junior resources firm, Kilimanjaro Capital, signed an agreement with a “Southern Cameroons” government representative in 2012; a few years later, its principals were [under investigation](#) by the Alberta Securities Commission for a “pump-and-dump” scheme. The Cameroon press has reported in detail this apparent [Canadian link](#) to recognizing, promoting and perhaps bankrolling Ambazonia independence. But other legitimate firms are engaged in exports, imports, service contracts, investment, etc.

Military relations began in 1969, leading to modest military assistance and the purchase of Caribou and Buffalo transport aircraft in the 1970s and 1980s. A Canadian colonel (2003-2004) assisted the UN in implementing an International Court of Justice decision regarding the disputed Bakassi border between Nigeria and Cameroon, a process completed in 2008 when Nigeria finally ceded its claim. In the mid-2000s, Canadian Armed Forces members participated in annual military adventure training and local development activities in the western regions. In 2012, 12 CAF members participated in a [multi-national communications exercise](#) in Douala, aimed at improving inter-operability among African and partner militaries. Since 2014, [Canada has trained](#) female Cameroon police officers for UN peacekeeping duties. At least until 2016 (as per last available information), Cameroon remained on the eligibility list for Canada’s Military Training and Co-operation Program.

There is also a strong Canadian connection directly into the heart of political leadership in Yaoundé. Prime Minister Philemon Yang previously served as Cameroon’s ambassador to Canada for 20 years (1984-2004, becoming high commissioner when Cameroon joined the Commonwealth in 1995). He proudly served as the [dean of the diplomatic corps](#) for 14 years. While in Canada he earned his master’s in law from the [University of Ottawa](#), writing an [intricate legal thesis](#) on “The inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises in international law”. Since being recalled in 2004, Yang worked in government at the highest levels, then was appointed prime minister in 2009. Though he is in theory the [head of government](#), the presidency and key ministers dominate Cameroon’s political system. That Yang hails from the Anglophone North West Region seemed to hold promise for western accommodation but the president, key ministers (only [six of 63 ministers](#) are Anglophones) and administrators have constrained his attempts to reach out to Ambazonians. Yang’s day-to-day power is limited, but he has been in long service of the current president and still has extensive links to North America. Canada’s relationship with Cameroon is long, varied and deep, even if most Canadians couldn’t find Cameroon on a map.



Centralized Government and Marginalized Western Cameroon

Since independence in 1960 Cameroon has had only two presidents. President Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Muslim northerner, cut his teeth in nationalist politics and government before independence, and subsequently ran the country under what became a centralized one-party state until 1982. Since then, President Paul Biya has ruled Cameroon (Biya also served as Ahidjo's prime minister for seven years prior). The "[octogenarian autocrat](#)" is running for re-election yet again next month (Oct. 7) after presidential term limits were removed in 2009. In recent years, Biya has spent more time in Switzerland and France than in Cameroon and rarely holds cabinet meetings. He reportedly governs remotely through WhatsApp, corresponding directly with ministers, military leaders, regional governors and his key interlocutors in Yaoundé (the capital city) or the port of Douala (the largest city and commercial centre). After heading to Europe at the beginning of August and then travelling to China for [triennial meetings](#) between Chinese and African leaders, he only returned on Sept. 15, with the official campaign season about to begin amid a quickly degenerating security situation in the west.

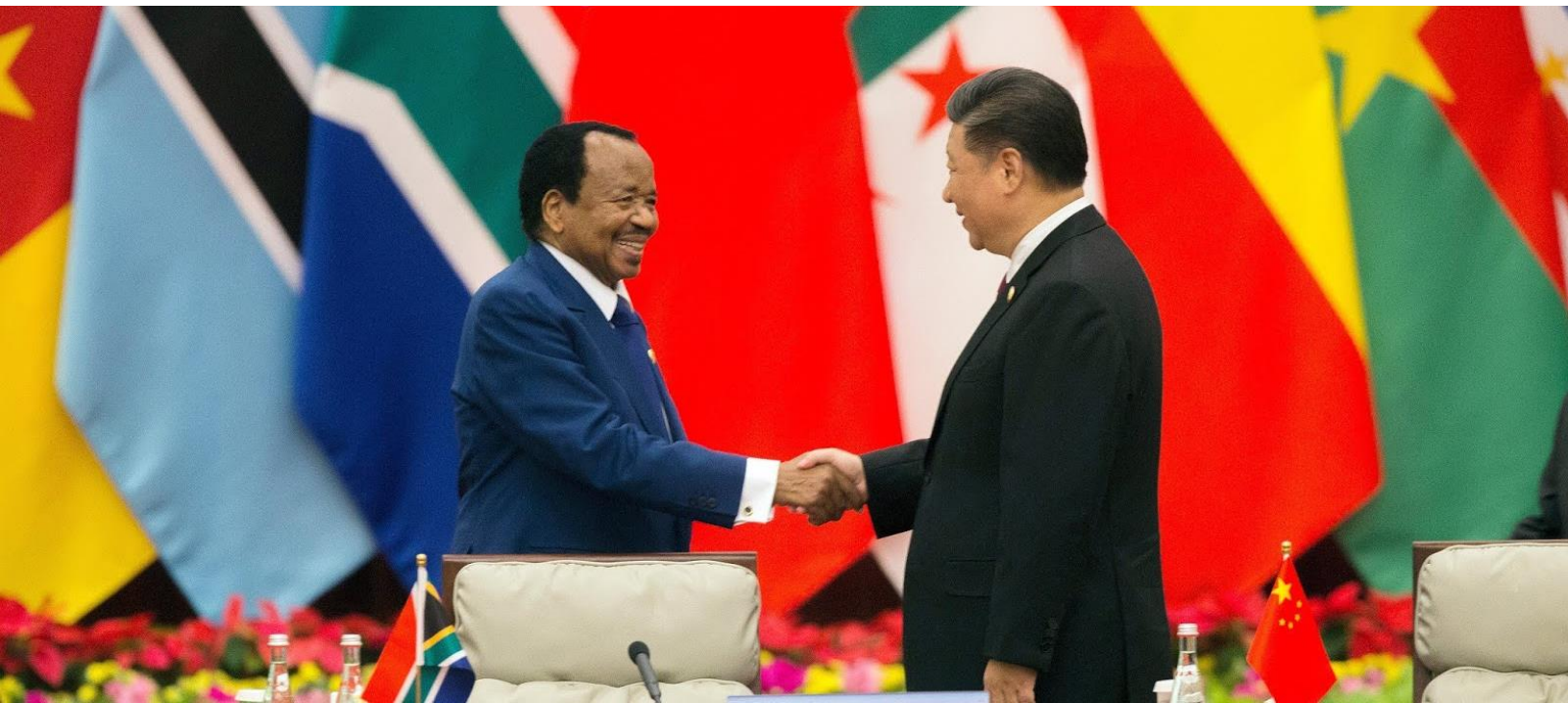


Figure 2: Cameroon President Paul Biya meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. (Source: AIPC)

That growing insecurity is in large part due to Biya's long-term failure since the 1980s to leverage Cameroon's vast resources and strategically situated deep-water port to drive inclusive development and opportunity across the country. Instead, the resource-rich west (including tourism, timber, oil and gas, minerals, plus an array of agricultural crops) does not receive many direct economic or service benefits, while western Anglophones have difficulty getting government jobs. They report [frustration with marginalization](#) both in the private and public sectors. Following the French model of education and administration, two elite schools train most



civil servants who serve in the ministries, parastatals or district offices, but even today the websites for both institutions are in French only (see [ENAM](#) and [ISMP](#) websites). Applying for public service jobs, including the military or police, is a costly affair given hefty application fees plus various certificates everyone must submit upon application. Fees are non-refundable, and it is widely accepted that merit is not the main basis for recruitment or promotion. Currently, only three of 33 generals are Anglophones. It also doesn't help that Cameroon regularly fares poorly on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, but in 2017 saw its ranking decline to its worst ever ([153rd/180](#)). The country is supposed to host the 2019 African Nations Cup next June, but [lack of progress on facilities](#) (and the growing insecurity) could force the Confederation of African Football to move the tournament.

Biya's longevity in office does not only derive from his domestic political domination and manoeuvrings, keeping officials from the cabinet down to district officers and traditional leaders dependent on his patronage. He has also strategically positioned Cameroon internationally. Besides the various "official" Amba armed groups and the government's military and gendarmes, there are bandits taking advantage of insecurity and, it appears, armed gangs being paid by government sources to undermine the reputation of secessionist groups. The Biya regime then pays US\$100,000/month to a Washington, D.C. [public relations firm](#) (Mercury Public Affairs) to play up government messaging and disparage opponents. The firm includes Vin Weber as principal; Weber once [worked closely](#) with convicted felon Paul Manafort in support of former pro-Putin president Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine. Global news services often accept the government version of events without local verification.

In international security terms, Cameroon is a linchpin both in the global war on terror and in support of UN and African Union peace operations. The United States has [trained the BIR](#) (Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide) for operations against Boko Haram and continues to [maintain a significant presence](#), but the BIR is now active in the west, operating from its large base near Limbe with the same impunity as it does in the far north. Concerns have also been [raised in Israel](#) about its past training and equipping of the BIR. The UN peacekeeping mission in Central African Republic depends on the port of Douala and Cameroon's road network to transport needed supplies to the landlocked country, in addition to the [1,000 troops](#) Cameroon deploys there. Besides the historically strong security ties with France, [China](#) is becoming a close defence partner. And the African Union selected Douala as the site for its [AU Continental Logistics Base](#).

In economic terms, large investments by French, U.S., Chinese and U.K. firms further insulate the Biya regime against international censure. The Chad-Cameroon pipeline, which luckily for Yaoundé does not transit the western regions, ships crude oil for landlocked Chad produced by two major international producers: ExxonMobil and the China National Petroleum Company. U.K.-based New Age LNG Ltd. [finalized an agreement](#) in June with the Cameroon government for its offshore natural gas production near Limbe in South West Region. Amba groups [raised alarms](#) about the nature of this deal with New Age. Early in 2018, [Kribi Port was officially commissioned](#), a deep sea container terminal built and financed by [China](#) and operated by a Franco-Chinese consortium. The fees, taxes and royalties from these projects and others fund administration, military expenditures and Biya's frequent travel, but they don't incentivize the government to



build the foundations of an inclusive political and economic system or worry about falling cocoa production by small-scale producers, mostly in the west.



Figure 3: A still image taken from a video shot on October 1, 2017, shows protesters waving Ambazonian flags in front of road block in the English-speaking city of Bamenda, Cameroon. (Source: Reuters)

With the Biya regime firmly against any negotiations that would put any type of federal option back on the table (or even local elections for regional governors), keenly felt marginalization finally exploded after the response to the October 2016 strikes. Since then, a steady stream of incredibly graphic photos and videos of atrocities have been shared on social media. However, since the late summer, mainstream North American coverage of Cameroon's descent has surged. [Foreign Policy](#), [Bloomberg](#), [Ottawa Citizen](#), [Toronto Star](#), [Le Journal de Montréal](#), [Voice of America](#), [New York Times](#), the [Montreal Gazette](#) and others have covered the recent escalation of violence in advance of the Oct. 7 elections. Ambazonian leadership has declared that elections will not be permitted in the west, and they promise to shut down transportation links into the west from what they disparagingly refer to as "La République du Cameroun". Life is becoming unbearable for most western Cameroonians, and even in the east the pressures of many displaced people are driving up housing and food costs for everyone. Growing insecurity is also leading to more crime: the [Russian ambassador](#) was attacked outside his hotel in the capital Yaoundé on Sept. 9, reportedly by bandits (not separatists).

But compared to the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) and senior [U.S. State Department officials](#), the [German Bundestag](#), the new United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [Michelle Bachelet](#) and even the [British House of Commons](#), Canada's public response has so far been



surprisingly [muted](#), although acknowledging some concerns within [UN diplomatic circles](#). Canada's limited response to the crisis this year comes across as either obliviousness or conscious avoidance. In March, Canada's ambassador to Senegal [visited Cameroon](#) as part of a pre-election Francophonie delegation "à assoir les conditions d'un processus électoral apaisé et inclusif, dans l'intérêt de l'unité nationale et de l'intégrité territoriale du Cameroun" (although the October election will inevitably return Biya for another seven-year term). In April, the parliamentary secretary for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fredericton MP Matt DeCoursey, along with senior Global Affairs Canada officials conducted a four-country trip to Africa, stopping in Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon and South Africa in advance of Canada's role as host of the G7 in June. While the visit to South Africa coincided with [Winnie Mandela's funeral](#), the short stop in Cameroon received minimal attention. Ostensibly, the visit was about [humanitarian relief](#) in the country's north, still suffering from years of fighting against Boko Haram, [shared bilingualism](#), [promotion of development](#) and [business relations](#), and to gauge support for the [re-election](#) of former governor general Michaëlle Jean as secretary general of the Francophonie. Jean's re-election is a bid that has looked [doomed to fail](#) for months, with Rwandan [Louise Mushikiwabo](#) likely to be elected in October. DeCoursey's trip of course included [a meeting](#) with that old friend of Canada, Prime Minister Philemon Yang. But at no time during the visit was the escalating crisis in the west mentioned publicly.

Even if concerns were voiced privately, the prime minister himself in late June reinforced the outward appearance of status quo normalcy in Canada-Cameroon commercial and development relations despite the deteriorating situation. A [June 29 press release](#) (a Friday heading into the July 1 long weekend) reported that Trudeau spoke with Biya by telephone about Canadian support for the Francophonie and Jean's re-election bid, and "The two leaders agreed to keep in touch." There was no mention of the deepening crisis within Cameroon. Was that press release Justin Trudeau's "Where's Biafra?" moment, though luckily out of public glare?

Cameroonians in Canada, however, have been [urging the government to take a more active role](#) and organizing demonstrations at various times and cities around the country. Their largest coordinated effort in three cities – Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto – occurred on [Aug. 10](#). But that very morning, all Canadian media were covering the [awful murder of four people in Fredericton](#), so the protests generated no media coverage and thus no public or political traction. Later, it became clear that the Fredericton shooter had become increasingly paranoid [about immigration](#), including a story promoted by Rebel Media about difficulties with Syrian students at Fredericton High School. And by a bizarre coincidence, this mass shooting occurred in DeCoursey's constituency; he had just visited Cameroon in April. Three weeks after the shooting, DeCoursey's parliamentary secretary portfolio shifted from Foreign Affairs to [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship](#). The sad irony is the Cameroon crisis is only going to increase immigration and refugee claimants from Cameroon, Nigeria and other countries in the region already experiencing mass refugee movements and internal displacement.



The Cameroon Time Bomb

Trudeau and his government have so many urgent files on their fall calendar that another insurgency in Africa is unlikely to make their top-10 list. But Cameroon may be different for Canada. As noted, the Canada-Cameroon relationship is long and deep. This special relationship builds on the uniqueness of the two countries' challenges managing French-English bilingualism and legal traditions. Representatives from the two countries often sit side by side at international meetings due simply to alphabetical seating. Canada has delivered hundreds of millions of dollars in development assistance since 1965, and thus has a stake in the country's success. Unlike Biafra in the late 1960s, there is a Cameroonian diaspora community that will continue to agitate for official Canada to engage more productively. Much of the public awareness and fundraising efforts for Ambazonia comes from the diaspora communities in North America and Europe. More public protests might occur in Canada on Oct. 1, the 57th anniversary of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. As the Oct. 7 election approaches, violence is [only going to get worse](#) and there is no evidence things will improve afterwards.

If Trudeau remains quiet despite the evidence of security force atrocities committed against Anglophones and restrictions on internal travel, or if he congratulates Biya on yet another (deeply flawed) election win in October, or ignores the Cameroon crisis at the UN General Assembly in September or the XVII Francophonie Summit in Armenia in mid-October, the whole notion that "Canada is back" and stands for human rights, democracy or feminist approaches to development assistance will ring hollow. If Canada's lack of significant response is designed not to offend a potential Francophonie vote for Jean's re-election bid, that is not only cynical but pointless: by all accounts she cannot win. If again the government is carefully trying to manage support for a UN Security Council seat in 2021, it becomes questionable whether Canada deserves to be there. Cameroon's crisis is entirely political, but the time is rapidly approaching when the only solution to the Anglophone crisis will be through force of arms. As a long-time friend of Cameroon, one that shares the challenge of official bilingualism and regional variation, Canada needs to step up before the last hope for a political solution completely disappears.

At the moment, the only active effort to bring all parties to the table is that offered by Cameroon's religious leaders and supported by the independent [International Crisis Group](#) for a proposed [Anglophone general conference](#) in November. International support and pressure will be required to get the government and secessionist groups around that table. While the current plan calls for those often-postponed meetings to take place in western Cameroon, it is more realistic for them to take place outside the country. There is an obvious opening for Canada to offer third-party mediation and to re-establish its credentials as a creative and committed international problem-solver. The alternative is stark: worsening political oppression, developmental setbacks, human rights abuses, mass displacement, war crimes, and national and regional instability driving more migration pressures with, eventually, a future call for another UN peacekeeping mission. Now is the time for Canada to act in an admittedly last-minute, preventive manner to try to get the Anglophone crisis back on a political track.

▶ **About the Author**

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