



Invitation to the Palaver Tree :

Website of the Project on Constitutional Options to resolve Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis

www.constitutionaloptionsproject.org

Our Origins

It is December **2018**.

Two years since the last quarter of **2016**, when social upheavals rocked the historically Anglophone regions of Cameroon (the Southwest and the Northwest), starting out from concerns about the use of Official Languages, the educational system, and the justice system.

One year since the last quarter of **2017**, when the turn of events escalated beyond just political tensions. On the heels of a movement with grave repercussions, armed groups launched their first attacks, thus taking the pre-existing crisis to another level.

As **2018** draws to a close, a group of Cameroonians, specialists in the fields of peace and security, the resolution of political conflicts, comparative constitutional design, and comparative political systems, begin concerting over how they may assist their country in finding a path towards peace, which remains elusive.

Together, they are keenly aware of the painful process countries undergo when they have to climb out of years of conflict, war, displacement, and desolation – having spent more than a decade working in many African countries in crisis (Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Chad, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Uganda, Burundi). They are part of the sizeable contingent of Cameroonian professionals who have worked within multilateral organisations (AU, UN, World Bank) to support conflict-affected countries back on the path towards peace. They also have special bonds with the two affected regions, having pursued part of their education, or having family ties there.

The outcome of their brainstorming would be to set up a **Project on Constitutional Options** towards peaceful resolution of the crisis affecting the two above-mentioned regions. The Project is premised on two fundamental principles. *First*, that it is appropriate for a debate and

exchange of ideas to conceptualize the problem, in order to better grasp the causes of the crisis. This constitutes an indispensable step for a correct diagnosis, which must precede corrective and remedial measures.

The *second* principle is that in the art of *peace-making* (which essentially consists in bringing the parties engaged to a conflict to pursue their aims and objectives through peaceful means), it is incumbent on the peace-makers to provide other regulated “arenas” for contestation, which can mediate between the parties’ respective positions. Hence the need to anchor and entrench the outcomes of the above debate, in the framework for mediating potential conflicts within a State. The most important being Constitutional norms and rules – which are the apex instruments, capable of adapting themselves to address national events of a grave nature.

The Project takes shape

Early in 2019, the group gets to work, and by mid-2019 the Project takes shape with its Researchers in place. For the Project team, its first-line objective is clear: *to demonstrate that a feasible safety valve for Cameroon to defuse the Anglophone crisis affecting the Southwest and Northwest regions, consists in re-thinking the ordering of functions and attributes between the State’s central organs and its constituent subnational units (Regions, Local Councils, Municipalities), seizing the opportunity to apply certain specificities to the management of these regions, on account of their unique historical trajectory.*

Demand for the Project Team’s work would increase with the convening by Government of the National Dialogue during the second half of 2019. The Team would thus take advantage of this opening and national attention, to issue a number of policy papers on the subject. We extend our appreciation to all the Cameroonian policy-makers who read our work (often providing feedback), to all stakeholders in the Anglophone crisis who did same (or critiqued our postulates), and to all Cameroon’s foreign partners, and citizens who took time to read our products.

In furtherance of this initiative which began in 2019, we hereby invite you to **discover our website**. The site is placed under the emblem of the great African baobab tree, emblematic venue for resolving problems that affect the common good of society. You will be able to access our various *publications* pertaining to the Anglophone crisis, notably proposed methods for its resolution, in the “**Publications**” section.

As Cameroon’s most senior officials have opined, the juxtaposition of English and French as official languages in the country (bringing with them different cultural and other facets) entails challenges that are not easy to overcome. Other multilingual countries, and even industrialized countries (Canada, Belgium) encounter difficulties managing these very same issues – leading to periodic waves of protest, social upheaval, political tensions, and even separatist tendencies. These experiences have yielded *a wealth of technical knowledge, on how to accommodate and manage this type of diversity* that Cameroun harbours. The website’s “**Resources**” section sheds some light on these bodies of knowledge.

Both in our publications and the external resources we bring to the attention of the site's users, the content is structured in order to **bring to the foreground, the critical conflict-generating or centrifugal policy areas**, that underly the crisis. These are the specific domains of public life whose management has the demonstrated potential to heighten tensions over the dual English/French heritage, and in which State policies can exacerbate perceptions, and claims about unequal treatment of the said heritages. Achieving a sustainable peace will require the ability to find consensus and points of convergence, on these intrinsically conflict-generating areas, on which positions tend to diverge fundamentally.

These are: (i) the extent of **devolution** that is undertaken, especially the degree of substantial capacity for autonomous action, by structures of government at the subnational level (Regions, Councils), which are selected/elected by, and primarily accountable to the population within their constituencies, (ii) the regulation of **official languages** across the country, namely equal access to a wide array of public and private services, in these two languages, (iii) the regulation of the **educational sub-systems** in English and in French respectively, (iv) the functioning of the **judicial system** (at national, and increasingly at supranational and regional community levels), given the dual legal cultures in Cameroon (bijuralism) arising from the dual English/French heritage. Given that the context has attained the level of a crisis, we also examine (v) **peace-making processes**, which consist of the mechanisms and tools resorted to, to de-escalate conflicts.

What to learn from the site?

In browsing the site, notably the *Publications* and *Resources*, you will find answers to a number of frequently asked questions:

- ϕ Why is it that in officially *multilingual* countries (such as Canada, Belgium, Cameroon), disagreements arising from specific sectors that are centrifugal or conflict-inducing (such as official languages use, education, justice) frequently lead to more political claims and confrontation, and even to political crises?
- ϕ What are the constitutional options available to a country that harbours significant sub-national diversity, but whose institutional actors are very concerned about national Unity, and are worried about the demobilizing effect of a Federal system? Are there nonetheless methods for a *Unitary* State to regulate some of its Regions or territorial units differently based on their specificities, especially as regards conflict-inducing sectors?
- ϕ When a country opts for the creation of Special Status Regions in a bid to de-escalate an on-going conflict or crisis, what are the *proven comparative best practices* in establishing such Regions? How can such a reform be leveraged in order to hasten an end to hostilities and a ceasefire? How do the concerned Regions express their assent to the Special Status granted? What modalities should regulate relations between the State at the centre, and the Special Status Region?

- φ Have Special Status or Special Autonomous Regions been used previously to de-escalate conflicts or curb separatist tendencies? Based on the comparative study of similar conflicts around the world, is there a demographic threshold (percentage of the total population) which when attained by the claimant group, tends to require that a level of autonomy be afforded, in order to avoid prolonged conflict?
- φ What are some of the factors that may lead parties to a conflict, to opt for a negotiated settlement to resolve it? Is it possible for insurgent political and armed groups which have a highly decentralised or even a fragmented structure, to enter into and abide by the terms of peace agreements? What does the said structuring of armed groups bode for the outcomes of the crisis or conflict?
- φ What is the *actual data on bilingualism* in Cameroon? How many Cameroonians are effectively bilingual in English and in French? How is the use of the official languages (English / French) spread across the different regions of the country? What were the levels of preference for and enrolment in the two respective educational sub-systems (in English and in French) between regions of the country?
- φ What was the *objective socio-economic situation* of the NW and SW regions before the onset of the crisis in 2016? Did these regions rank much worse in development indicators, compared to other regions of the country?
- φ Is there data available from before the onset of the crisis, on the *perception and level of trust by the population* of the two primarily English-speaking region, towards the State/public administration, the political system and institutions, and on their sense of national identity (belonging)?

We invite you to read and discover both versions of the website (in French and in English). The two versions complement each other, in particular where certain external resource materials are only available in a single language. However, the crux of the ideas expressed in both, are identical.

Hope you find the site useful,

The Project Team
October 2020



THE CONSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS PROJECT

▶ PROJECT ON CONSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

To attenuate conflict in Cameroon's historically Anglophone regions through reforming the practice of government between the central State and its constituent sub-national Regions.

▶ OUR MISSION STATEMENT

This Project seeks to draw on the best available knowledge and practice to inform policies on how to accommodate Cameroon's diverse heritages, including in official languages, educational systems, and legal practice traditions. The project has been developed in response to challenges the country has faced in recent years.

▶ OUR BRAND

Lodged under the emblem of the large African Baobab tree, the Project places faith in the peaceful expression and debate of divergent views on critical problems affecting the national body politic, with all opinions protected under the bounteous shade of the Palaver Tree, a problem-solving venue. Constitutional Options, in this light, are tools to entrench and anchor the emerging consensus into the management of public affairs.

