

## The strategy of the Cameroon Government in handling the Anglophone Crisis: The use of soft power and hard power

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### Abstract

Since 2016, the Cameroonian government has employed a dual strategy of hard and soft power in responding to the Anglophone Crisis—a secessionist conflict that has claimed over 6,000 lives and displaced more than 700,000 people<sup>[8]</sup>. This article examines how the Biya administration has calibrated coercive military force with performative dialogue mechanisms, constitutional reforms, and bilingualism initiatives to manage the crisis while resisting international mediation. Drawing on theories of strategic communication, authoritarian governance, and sovereignty politics, the study posits that the government's use of hard power—including military crackdowns, arbitrary arrests, and obstruction of humanitarian aid—has paradoxically radicalized the conflict and entrenched separatist demands, while its soft power tools—including the Major National Dialogue, the National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (NCBM), and symbolic institutional reforms—have functioned more as legitimizing performances for domestic and international audiences than as genuine pathways to peace<sup>[4]</sup>. The research question asks how the government's combined use of hard and soft power has shaped the trajectory of the Anglophone Crisis and with what consequences for conflict resolution. Empirical analysis reveals that the government's rejection of external mediation, rooted in a long-standing doctrine of sovereignty and non-interference, has created conditions for a self-sustaining war economy that makes peace economically disadvantageous for armed actors. The findings suggest that durable peace requires a fundamental reorientation from coercive containment and performative dialogue toward genuine power-sharing, federalist restructuring, and inclusive negotiations that address structural marginalization.

**Keywords:** Anglophone Crisis, hard power, soft power, Cameroon, strategic communication, sovereignty, mediation

### Introduction

When a wave of peaceful protests swept through Cameroon's North West and South West regions in the autumn of 2016, Anglophone lawyers and teachers took to the streets demanding bilingual reforms to a legal and educational system they claimed was dominated by French language and tradition<sup>[10]</sup>. The government response was swift: security forces violently suppressed demonstrations, banned Anglophone political parties, and mass-jailed leaders<sup>[7]</sup>. By October 2017, separatists had declared the formation of the Ambazonian state, and the conflict had escalated into a full-scale armed insurrection.

Eight years on, the crisis has become one of Africa's most enduring and underreported conflicts. Over 6,000 people have been killed, more than 700,000 displaced internally, and over 73,000 have fled to Nigeria<sup>[17]</sup>. The conflict has hollowed out once-vibrant cities like Bamenda, destroyed educational and health infrastructure, and created a ransom-driven war economy that has transformed violence into a profitable enterprise<sup>[6]</sup>.

The Cameroonian government's strategy in handling the Anglophone Crisis represents a complex interplay of hard and soft power. Hard power—military crackdowns, arrests, obstruction of humanitarian aid, and rejection of external mediation—has been deployed alongside soft power instruments—dialogue initiatives, constitutional reforms, bilingualism commissions, and strategic communication campaigns. Understanding this dual strategy is essential for comprehending why the conflict has persisted and why prospects for peace remain remote.

The problem statement of this article posits that the government's combined use of hard and soft power, while appearing as a coherent strategy of conflict management,

has in practice functioned as a mutually reinforcing cycle of coercion and performative legitimation that has entrenched rather than resolved the crisis. Existing literature acknowledges the government's repressive response but fails to adequately explain how its soft power initiatives—far from being genuine peacebuilding efforts—have served to legitimize hard power approaches, delegitimize separatist actors, and deflect international pressure, while simultaneously failing to address the structural marginalization at the heart of Anglophone grievances<sup>[10]</sup>. The central problem is therefore the lack of integrated analysis regarding how the government's strategic communication and performative dialogue function alongside military coercion to perpetuate the conflict. Accordingly, the research question asks: "How has the Cameroonian government's combined use of hard and soft power shaped the trajectory of the Anglophone Crisis, and with what consequences for conflict resolution?"

The hypothesis posits that the government's hard power approach has radicalized separatist movements and transformed the conflict into a self-sustaining war economy, while its soft power initiatives have functioned as performative legitimization mechanisms that exclude key actors, avoid root causes, and ultimately reinforce the status quo of marginalization. This study is grounded in theories of strategic communication, authoritarian governance, and the political economy of conflict.

### The Historical Context: Structural Marginalization and the Roots of the Crisis

#### a. Colonial Legacies and the "Marriage of Unequals"

The origins of the Anglophone Crisis lie in Cameroon's complex colonial history. Initially colonized by Germany as

"Kamerun" following the 1884 Berlin Conference, the territory was divided between Britain and France after Germany's defeat in World War I. French Cameroun became a distinct administrative entity under French rule, while British Southern Cameroons—today's North West and South West regions—were administered as part of British Nigeria<sup>[16]</sup>. For 41 years, the two territories developed separate political, legal, and educational systems, with passports required for travel between them<sup>[15]</sup>. Independence deepened these divisions. While French Cameroun gained independence in January 1960, British Southern Cameroons was only offered two options in a UN-supervised plebiscite: joining Nigeria or reuniting with Francophone Cameroon<sup>[5]</sup>. The optimistic vision of a "reunified Cameroon" articulated by President Ahmadou Ahidjo and Southern Cameroons Prime Minister John Ngu Foncha was quickly betrayed at the July 1961 Foumban Constitutional Congress<sup>[15]</sup>. The Anglophone delegation included no British presence, while French advisors worked alongside Francophone delegates; proposals for a quota of Anglophone government ministers and a bicameral legislature were summarily rejected; the total meeting between the Anglophone delegation and President Ahidjo lasted one hour and thirty-five minutes; and the resulting "federal" system was so centralized that it was "hardly federal at all"<sup>[16]</sup>.

Anglophone fears of absorption were realized in 1972 when Ahidjo abolished the federal system entirely, replacing it with a unitary state called the United Republic of Cameroon<sup>[5]</sup>. Twelve years later, his successor, Paul Biya, renamed the country "La République du Cameroun," further erasing Anglo-Saxon cultural references<sup>[10]</sup>. These moves systematically dismantled the federal safeguards that had preserved Anglophone autonomy and identity<sup>[16]</sup>.

## **b. Patterns of Marginalization**

The consequences of centralization are starkly evident in how resources and opportunities are distributed. Anglophones, constituting approximately 20% of the population, receive far less than proportional representation in public sector recruitment, elite administrative schools, and senior government positions<sup>[11]</sup>. In the 2014 and 2015 ENAM admission cycles, Anglophone candidates represented less than 10% of successful candidates—in some years falling as low as 5%<sup>[11]</sup>. Budget allocations show that less than 10% of public investment between 2000 and 2015 was directed toward the Northwest and Southwest regions combined<sup>[19]</sup>. Out of more than 60 ministerial posts, Anglophones typically hold fewer than five, often in ministries without significant financial clout<sup>[10]</sup>.

This structural marginalization—what scholars have called a "marriage of unequals"—created the conditions for the 2016 protests and subsequent secessionist conflict<sup>[16]</sup>. The government's response to these grievances, however, would transform a peaceful social movement into a violent civil war.

## **Hard Power: Military Coercion and State Repression**

### **a. The Military Crackdown**

The government's primary response to the Anglophone Crisis has been military coercion. When lawyers and teachers went on strike in autumn 2016, the government responded with arrests and torture. Lawyers were beaten in the streets, teachers manhandled by police, and students

jailed for demanding better<sup>[18]</sup>. Within months, rhetoric from government officials grew poisonous, with some labeling Anglophones "dogs" and "cockroaches"<sup>[8]</sup>. President Paul Biya escalated matters by labeling protesters "terrorists" and vowing to crush them<sup>[3]</sup>.

The declaration of Ambazonian independence on 1 October 2017 marked a point of no return. The government hardened its stance, and negotiations became nearly impossible<sup>[2]</sup>. President Biya stated that Cameroon was being hijacked by "terrorists masking as secessionists" and vowed to eliminate them—a statement that Anglophone leaders interpreted as a formal declaration of war<sup>[7]</sup>.

Throughout the conflict, the US Department of State has documented human rights violations by the government ranging from targeted political killings to attacks on the press<sup>[18]</sup>. Entire villages were razed in the early days of the crisis, and children, farmers, and the elderly were killed<sup>[7]</sup>. The military has been known to target civilians outright, and arbitrary arrests, torture, and sexual violence have been documented<sup>[18]</sup>. Between 2017 and 2025, the conflict claimed over 6,000 lives<sup>[8]</sup>.

### **b. Obstruction of Humanitarian Aid**

The government has systematically obstructed humanitarian assistance to the conflict-affected regions. Research on the government's behavior during the Anglophone Crisis shows that it has strong incentives to block or hinder humanitarian response, driven by security concerns and historical animosity toward regions that have traditionally been bastions of opposition to the central government<sup>[1]</sup>.

In the conflict zones of the Northwest and Southwest, the government is highly suspicious of local communities collaborating with armed groups formed directly from local populations<sup>[1]</sup>. Even if many civilians wish for peace, it is difficult for the government to distinguish where loyalties lie; it generally assumes that much of the Anglophone population constitutes potential defectors and supporters of non-state armed groups. This perception is bolstered by the visible support from demonstrators prior to the conflict's outbreak<sup>[8]</sup>.

In the reception zones of the West and Littoral regions, the government has even more reason to obstruct aid<sup>[1]</sup>. These regions have histories of violent rebellion (the Bamiléké War) and represent seats of opposition to the central government. By denying aid to displaced populations, the government contains them within the conflict zones, where they are better controlled. It also prevents resources from reaching its political rivals<sup>[17]</sup>. The government's obstruction was selectively applied: in Douala, the economic capital, the government was more permissive of aid because the city was essential for the national economy and stability which is paramount<sup>[1]</sup>.

This coercive approach mirrors the government's historical response to dissent. Founding leader Ahmadou Ahidjo used brutal force against nationalist movements, and Biya, who served in Ahidjo's government, learned that repressive measures work<sup>[10]</sup>. Biya used similar tactics against rivals and opposition<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **c. The Weaponization of Strategic Communication**

The government has also employed strategic communication as a tool of hard power. A study on strategic communication in the Anglophone Crisis argues that "the strategic communication of the government failed to avoid

the current violence, which was certainly not the desired end state" <sup>[3]</sup>. The government's silence regarding initial Anglophone claims was a mishandling of strategic communication that allowed a peaceful concern to transform into armed conflict <sup>[3]</sup>.

Measures implemented by the government—such as the creation of the National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, the creation of a Common Law Section at the Supreme Court, the recruitment of 1,000 bilingual teachers, the recruitment of Anglophone magistrates, and the reestablishment of the internet after 92 days of interruption—"were too late for Anglophone leaders" <sup>[3]</sup>. The delay in responding to Anglophone grievances signaled that the government had no intention of addressing them, radicalizing the population and legitimizing separatism <sup>[3]</sup>. Unlike the government, separatist strategic communication succeeded in turning corporatist claims into a political matter <sup>[3]</sup>. Through framing and disinformation, separatists framed the Anglophone Crisis as an international concern, exaggerated crimes, and sought international support. The declaration of independence on 1 October 2017 decreased the government's ability to use certain types of communication and gave secessionists a wider international audience <sup>[3]</sup>.

## **Soft Power: Dialogue, Commission, and Performance**

### **a. The Major National Dialogue**

In September 2019, the government announced a "Major National Dialogue" to address the Anglophone Crisis <sup>[4]</sup>. However, the process was fundamentally flawed. There was only a three-week interval between the dialogue's announcement and its start—insufficient time for pre-dialogue consultations and trust-building essential for meaningful peacebuilding <sup>[4]</sup>. Key stakeholders were excluded: separatist leaders boycotted the process entirely, and federalists, activists, and opposition figures were largely absent <sup>[2]</sup>.

Crucially, the dialogue meticulously avoided discussing federalism or separation—precisely the issues at the heart of the conflict <sup>[4]</sup>. Efforts to persuade the government to conduct the dialogue on neutral territory with third-party mediation were rejected <sup>[2]</sup>. The dialogue served merely as a smokescreen for international observers, with no genuine intention of finding a lasting solution <sup>[4]</sup>.

The dialogue's failure reflects patterns repeated across Africa: a lack of inclusion, inadequate trust-building measures, and agenda-setting that avoids addressing root causes <sup>[8]</sup>. Separatist leaders dismissed the dialogue as pointless, and their renunciation of participation emphasized their lack of willingness to achieve a peaceful solution <sup>[2]</sup>. The dialogue hardened both sides: the government interpreted separatist boycotts as evidence of bad faith, while separatists saw the dialogue as a performative exercise designed to legitimize the status quo <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **b. The National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism**

Following the dialogue, the government established the National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (NCBM), tasked with promoting bilingualism and addressing Anglophone grievances <sup>[4]</sup>. However, the NCBM has been widely criticized as ineffective. Locals dismiss it as a "joke" <sup>[8]</sup>. The commission lacks teeth: it has no

enforcement powers, its recommendations are not binding, and it has produced no meaningful reforms <sup>[11]</sup>.

The NCBM represents a classic example of performative soft power: an institution created to signal government responsiveness but designed to fail <sup>[13]</sup>. It absorbs criticism, deflects international pressure, and creates an illusion of progress while the underlying structures of marginalization remain untouched <sup>[11]</sup>.

### **c. Symbolic Reforms**

The government has implemented a series of symbolic reforms: the creation of a Common Law Section at the Supreme Court, recruitment of bilingual teachers and Anglophone magistrates, and reestablishment of the internet after 92 days of interruption <sup>[4]</sup>. These measures are often described as "too late" and insufficient to address the depth of Anglophone grievances <sup>[3]</sup>.

The pattern is consistent: the government responds to crisis with symbolic gestures that signal responsiveness but avoid substantive change. A bilingual teachers' recruitment program does not address structural underrepresentation of Anglophones in public sector recruitment; the creation of a Common Law Section does not restore the federal system that once preserved Anglophone autonomy; and the reestablishment of the internet after months of blackout cannot undo the political and economic damage caused by the conflict.

### **d. Resistance to International Mediation**

Perhaps the clearest expression of the government's soft power strategy is its resistance to international mediation. Cameroon has a long history of protecting what it sees as its own business <sup>[4]</sup>. In 1992, after the US administration criticized Biya for electoral fraud, the government fired back, withdrawing Cameroon's ambassador from Washington and informing the US ambassador that America should stay clear of Cameroon's internal affairs.

In 2008, when Biya changed Cameroon's constitution to eliminate presidential term limits, the US ambassador criticized the move. Again, Cameroonian officials pushed back, asking the ambassador not to interfere in the nation's internal politics. This pattern has continued throughout the Anglophone Crisis. The government has rebuffed initiatives from Switzerland and Canada, publicly stating it asked no nation to mediate <sup>[2]</sup>.

The Swiss mediation, which began in 2019, was particularly instructive <sup>[2]</sup>. Switzerland's facilitation attempt ultimately failed because the government used it as a stalling tactic while pursuing military objectives. The government's behavior was shaped by other priorities and considerations—primarily, maintaining regime stability and avoiding meaningful concessions <sup>[2]</sup>. In 2022, secret negotiations between the government and separatist leaders in Switzerland were abruptly ended when the government rejected Swiss mediation in favor of continued military operations <sup>[2]</sup>.

The Canadian initiative was even more short-lived <sup>[2]</sup>. On 20 January 2023, Canada's foreign minister announced that the two sides had agreed to start peace negotiations. Shortly after, Anglophone leaders issued a joint statement affirming their commitment to participate. But three days later, the government brushed aside Canada's efforts, denying that it had asked a "foreign party" to broker a resolution to the conflict <sup>[2]</sup>.

The government's resistance to international mediation is rooted in a doctrine of sovereignty that dates to independence<sup>[4]</sup>. Cameroon's diplomatic relations are based on respect of national sovereignty and non-intervention in each other's internal affairs<sup>[4]</sup>. The leadership rejects outside intervention on issues it regards as within its sovereignty and internal affairs. This sovereignty doctrine functions as a soft power mechanism: it legitimizes the government's refusal to engage with international pressure, deflects criticism, and frames external intervention as illegitimate interference.

### **The Contradictions of Government Strategy**

#### **a. When Soft Power Undermines Hard Power**

The government's dual strategy of hard and soft power contains fundamental contradictions. The use of hard power has radicalized the population, transformed the conflict into a secessionist war, and created conditions for a war economy that makes peace economically disadvantageous for armed actors<sup>[6]</sup>. The use of soft power has been so performative and exclusionary that it has delegitimized the government in the eyes of Anglophone populations, further entrenching the conflict.

The declaration of independence on 1 October 2017—a direct response to the government's violent crackdown—exemplifies this contradiction<sup>[3]</sup>. The government's hard power response transformed a social movement into a secessionist armed conflict, radicalized the population, and created conditions for criminal enterprises to flourish<sup>[6]</sup>. The government's soft power initiatives—the dialogue, the NCBM, the symbolic reforms—arrived too late to prevent this radicalization and were dismissed as insufficient by Anglophone populations<sup>[4]</sup>.

The strategic communication of the government has similarly backfired. By labeling protesters "terrorists" and vowing to eliminate them, the government gave separatists a propaganda victory, allowing them to frame the conflict as an existential struggle. The brutality of the war on both sides intensified, and the government's message spread quickly on social media, mobilizing the Anglophone region<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **b. The War Economy and the Spoils of Violence**

The contradictions of government strategy are most evident in the emergence of a lucrative war economy. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime recorded nearly 450 ransom abductions in 2023, generating at least FCFA 4.5 billion in payments<sup>[6]</sup>. The majority of separatist armed groups have become involved in illicit and criminal activities; some factions have effectively transformed into mafia-style groups engaged primarily in smuggling and extortion.

The war economy has fundamentally altered the conflict. As one former separatist fighter explained, "Civilians were never our target but became due to how expensive our generals saw it was to run a war and an army. They had to resort to feed from and hurt the very people they claimed to be protecting"<sup>[6]</sup>. The ideological struggle has been hollowed out, replaced by the relentless pursuit of profit. Kidnapping and extortion have become so profitable that peace is economically disadvantageous for armed actors<sup>[6]</sup>. The government's hard power approach has paradoxically enabled the war economy. By militarizing the conflict and refusing to engage in meaningful negotiations, the

government has created conditions where armed groups can sustain themselves through kidnapping and extortion<sup>[6]</sup>. The government's obstruction of humanitarian aid has also contributed to the war economy by limiting alternative sources of income for affected populations.

#### **c. The Fragmentation of Separatist Movements**

The government's hard power strategy has also contributed to the fragmentation of separatist movements<sup>[6]</sup>. The recurrent disagreements between armed groups can be explained by two factors: political leadership struggle and economic motivation. The two most influential groups—the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGC) and the Interim Government (IG)—have constantly accused each other of conniving with government authorities to slow their operations or make impossible their struggle for a separatist nation.

Swiss and Canadian peace talks were characterized by infighting among self-proclaimed, all-diasporic separatist leaders abrogating the legitimacy to talk or negotiate on behalf of the people of the North West and South West regions<sup>[2]</sup>. The largely diaspora-based separatist leadership, initially key to raising funds and buying weapons, has seen their influence slip as fighters increasingly turn to homegrown sources of revenue<sup>[6]</sup>. Their political clout has also been diminished by constant internal feuding.

This fragmentation serves the government's interest: divided separatist movements are less capable of mounting a unified challenge, and internal divisions can be exploited to delegitimize separatist claims<sup>[2]</sup>. However, fragmentation also complicates resolution: the government cannot negotiate with a single entity, and the proliferation of armed groups creates conditions for continued violence<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **d. The Hierarchy of Belonging**

The government's differential treatment of protests reveals a fundamental contradiction in its strategy<sup>[12]</sup>. In 2023, when protests erupted in Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam, and Garoua after Cameroon's October presidential election, the government's response was measured: soldiers reasoned with protesters, prefects and mayors walked through marketplaces pleading with citizens to reopen shops, and the tone was softer<sup>[12]</sup>.

This contrasts starkly with the government's response to the Anglophone protests in 2016<sup>[12]</sup>. When Anglophone lawyers and teachers protested peacefully, the government responded with brute force, calling them "dogs" and "cockroaches" and labeling them "terrorists"<sup>[7]</sup>. Entire villages were razed, and children, farmers, and the elderly were killed.

This differential treatment reflects what scholars have called a "hierarchy of belonging" in Cameroon: when dissent comes from the margins (the Anglophone regions), it is criminalized; when it arises from the center (Francophone regions), it is understood<sup>[10]</sup>. The same leaders who branded peaceful teachers as "terrorists" now preach unity and dialogue when their own base takes to the streets. This is not growth; it is convenience disguised as wisdom.

The government's selective use of soft power—engaging in dialogue and offering concessions to Francophone protesters while repressing Anglophone protesters—undermines its claim to moral authority<sup>[12]</sup>. The wounds of the Anglophone regions cannot close through silence or selective sympathy. Cameroon's redemption lies not in managing crises

differently but in valuing every citizen equally before the crisis begins.

## **The International Dimension: Sovereignty and Non-Intervention**

### **a. The Commonwealth's Silence**

Despite Cameroon's membership in the Commonwealth since 1995—the first country with French colonial heritage to join—the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) has kept the crisis off its formal agenda. This silence has severe consequences: "continued limited Commonwealth political engagement on the crisis leaves open pathways of instability at a time of continued destruction in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, lessening international attention to the conflict, growing alternative foreign investment and rising political turmoil ahead of future changes of government" <sup>[4]</sup>.

The limited CMAG response is explained by three factors: Cameroon's long-held emphasis on sovereignty and resistance to international influence; complex legacies of the British government's handling of decolonization in Anglophone Cameroon; and international uncertainty regarding intervention on issues of language conflict and discrimination.

The government's sovereignty doctrine has been remarkably effective at deflecting international pressure <sup>[2]</sup>. Cameroon has rebuffed initiatives from the African Union, Switzerland, and Canada, arguing that the conflict is an internal affair. Removing Cameroon from aid programs such as USAID and AGOA has not deterred its leaders <sup>[4]</sup>. This resilience reflects the government's calculation that it can weather international criticism without conceding meaningful reforms.

### **b. The Geopolitics of Neglect**

The international community's muted response also reflects geopolitical calculations <sup>[8]</sup>. Cameroon is strategically important for Western powers, hosting a key US military base in the Far North region for counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram <sup>[8]</sup>. This strategic interest may explain the muted response: Western powers are reluctant to pressure President Biya's government, which they view as a valuable partner in regional security, despite documented human rights abuses <sup>[4]</sup>.

China's growing investment in Cameroon has introduced another dimension <sup>[4]</sup>. China's policy of non-intervention means it will not pressure the government on the Anglophone Crisis. As one analyst noted, "given China's investment in Cameroon, it can do more to engage the Biya regime on the anglophone crisis. Like Cameroon, China's policy also stipulates a policy of nonintervention, but it has repeatedly changed course when its strategic interests are threatened. Major power status demands major responsibilities, and showing the will to stop chronic human rights violations remains an important obligation" <sup>[4]</sup>.

The geopolitical context—Cameroon's strategic importance, Western reluctance to pressure an authoritarian ally, China's non-intervention policy, and Commonwealth uncertainty regarding language conflicts—has created conditions where the government can employ hard power with impunity and soft power without accountability <sup>[8]</sup>.

## **Pathways to Peace: Reorienting Hard and Soft Power**

### **a. Addressing Structural Marginalization**

The root cause of the Anglophone Crisis is structural marginalization, and addressing it requires fundamental governance restructuring <sup>[11]</sup>. The government's soft power initiatives—the dialogue, the NCBM, the symbolic reforms—have failed because they avoid addressing root causes <sup>[4]</sup>. A return to a federal structure that grants meaningful autonomy to the Anglophone regions is essential <sup>[16]</sup>. The government should implement proportional representation in public recruitment, budget allocations, and political appointments to ensure that Anglophones receive their fair share <sup>[10]</sup>. Genuine bilingualism—where English has equal standing with French in administration, education, and justice—must be enforced, not just proclaimed <sup>[11]</sup>.

### **b. Genuine and Inclusive Dialogue**

The 2019 National Dialogue failed because it excluded key actors and avoided root causes <sup>[2]</sup>. Future peace efforts must be inclusive: all stakeholders—separatist groups, civil society organizations, women's groups, youth, and traditional leaders—must be at the table <sup>[8]</sup>. Agenda-setting must focus on tackling the underlying drivers of conflict, such as political marginalization, social inequality, and historical grievances <sup>[11]</sup>. The government must be willing to address federalism, resource allocation, and political representation <sup>[16]</sup>.

Importantly, national dialogue should not be a one-off event. Creating platforms for ongoing open and honest discussion, acknowledging past mistakes, and committing to concrete actions for redress is essential <sup>[8]</sup>. Neutral venues with third-party mediation would help alleviate trust and security concerns, particularly for rebels and separatist groups.

The government's resistance to international mediation must be overcome <sup>[4]</sup>. Cameroon's sovereignty doctrine has been weaponized to deflect international pressure and avoid accountability. The international community—particularly the Commonwealth, the African Union, the United States, and the European Union—must press for genuine dialogue and condition engagement on human rights and democratic governance <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **c. Breaking the War Economy**

The war economy presents perhaps the most difficult challenge to peace. The profitability of kidnapping for ransom makes political resolution economically disadvantageous for those who profit from ongoing instability <sup>[6]</sup>. Breaking this cycle requires improved security, disrupting financial flows, and providing alternative economic opportunities for combatants.

The National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) has made some progress, but reintegration faces significant challenges: former fighters often return to communities traumatized by their actions, and economic opportunities are scarce. Sustainable peace requires not only demobilizing combatants but also creating viable economic alternatives that make peace more profitable than war. This requires investment in infrastructure, education, and economic development in the Anglophone regions—precisely the kind of investment that has been systematically denied through discriminatory budget allocations <sup>[19]</sup>.

#### d. Reimagining Soft Power

The government's soft power initiatives have been performative and exclusionary. Reimagining soft power requires moving beyond symbolic gestures to substantive change. This means genuine bilingualism, not just commissions; proportional representation, not just token appointments; meaningful decentralization, not just rhetoric. It also means changing the government's narrative: from labeling Anglophones "terrorists" to recognizing their legitimate grievances; from offering dialogue that excludes key actors to creating genuinely inclusive processes; from resisting international mediation to welcoming it as a tool for peace<sup>[3]</sup>.

The government's strategic communication must shift from framing the conflict as a security problem to be managed through military force to framing it as a governance problem to be resolved through political reform<sup>[3]</sup>. This requires listening to what Anglophones hear and understand, not just what the government wants to say. The narrative of a stakeholder is the reflection of what has been understood from the strategic communication of its counterpart; whatever could be the strangeness of a narrative, it is most often the response to a previous strategic communication.

#### Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the Cameroonian government's strategy in handling the Anglophone Crisis—a dual approach combining hard and soft power—has functioned as a mutually reinforcing cycle of coercion and performative legitimation that has entrenched rather than resolved the conflict. The evidence confirms the hypothesis that hard power has radicalized separatist movements and transformed the conflict into a self-sustaining war economy, while soft power initiatives have served as performative legitimization mechanisms that exclude key actors, avoid root causes, and ultimately reinforce the status quo of marginalization<sup>[11]</sup>.

The government's hard power approach—military crackdowns, arbitrary arrests, obstruction of humanitarian aid, and rejection of international mediation—has failed to resolve the conflict<sup>[18]</sup>. Instead, it has radicalized the population, transformed a social movement into a secessionist war, and created conditions for a war economy that makes peace economically disadvantageous for armed actors. The government's soft power initiatives—the Major National Dialogue, the National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, and symbolic reforms—have been performative and exclusionary, serving to legitimize hard power approaches and deflect international pressure rather than address root causes.

The government's differential treatment of protests—repressing Anglophone dissent while engaging Francophone protesters—reveals a hierarchy of belonging in Cameroon that has eroded the government's moral authority and legitimacy. The international community's muted response, rooted in Cameroon's sovereignty doctrine and geopolitical calculations, has enabled the government to employ hard power with impunity and soft power without accountability. Grounded in theories of strategic communication, authoritarian governance, and the political economy of conflict, this study concludes that sustainable peace requires a fundamental reorientation of the government's strategy. Hard power must be replaced with genuine governance reform: meaningful federalism or decentralization that

grants genuine autonomy to Anglophone regions; proportional representation in public recruitment, budget allocation, and political appointments and genuine bilingualism enforced, not just proclaimed. Soft power must move from performative legitimation to genuine dialogue: inclusive processes that bring all stakeholders—including separatist groups—to the table; willingness to address federalism, resource allocation, and political representation; and openness to international mediation.

The future of Cameroon depends on whether these reforms are pursued with genuine commitment. The alternative is a continuation of violence, displacement, and human suffering—a future where the war economy deepens, the state's legitimacy erodes, and the cycle of coercion and performative dialogue continues. As one Bamenda resident observed, the crisis has made life "miserable" for millions: "For the past ten years, our lives have been miserable. We have lost relatives. They burned homes, looted our properties. I'm an orphan. My parents have all died because of this"<sup>[8]</sup>. The time for genuine change is now.

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