

CAMEROON: ANGLOPHONE PROTESTS HIGHLIGHT HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES

By Sarah Graveline

In Cameroon's English-speaking regions, an escalating cycle of protest followed by government reaction is bringing the minority Anglophone population's longstanding grievances to a crisis point. Since lawyers and teachers began organizing protests in October 2016, the government has arrested hundreds of citizens and shut off internet services in Cameroon's Southwest and Northwest regions. While this reaction has drawn international criticism, neither Cameroon's government nor Anglophone protestors have taken steps to de-escalate the situation. This standoff has increasing economic and political costs for the country. [more...](#)



Protestors in Cameroon. (Source: "Cameroon: Excessive force that led to deaths of protesters must be urgently investigated," *Amnesty International*, December 9, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/jx8ewqk>.)

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By Alexander Noyes

On January 21, 2017, Yahya Jammeh, ruler of The Gambia for 22 years, yielded to regional diplomatic and military pressure and finally [stepped down](#) from power, heading into exile in Equatorial Guinea. After losing an election to opposition candidate Adama Barrow on December 1, 2016, Jammeh initially [conceded](#) defeat, but quickly thereafter reneged and vowed to remain in power. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) led the effort to force Jammeh to respect the election outcome, organizing and deploying a force of [7,000](#) troops. In contrast to other regional bodies in Africa, which have uneven records of defending democracy, this intervention demonstrated ECOWAS's commitment to upholding democratic ideals in West Africa. [more...](#)



A woman poses in front of ECOWAS Senegalese troops near to the state house in the Gambian capital Banjul, Sunday January 22, 2017, one day after Gambia's defeated leader Yahya Jammeh went into exile. (Source: AP Photo/Jerome Delay.)

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Understanding the Roots of the Crisis

The current crisis reflects a longstanding divide between Cameroon's majority French-speaking population and its Anglophone minority, which comprises [20 percent](#) of the population. This divide resulted from colonial policies. Following Germany's defeat in WWI, Britain and France partitioned Germany's colonial territory, attaching southern and northern Cameroon to Britain's Eastern Province of Nigeria, while the rest of Cameroon came under French control. In 1961, as Britain withdrew from West Africa, southern Cameroon [voted](#) to rejoin Cameroon as part of a newly independent federated government.

Since 1961, Cameroon's Anglophone and Francophone regions have disagreed over the role of the central government. Although Anglophone politicians pushed for semi-autonomous governance under the federated system, Cameroon's ruling party successfully moved the country toward increasingly [centralized rule](#) under French-majority control. In May 1972, Cameroon became a unitary government, which further weakened Cameroon's Anglophone region by removing its semiautonomous status.

The 1972 [constitution](#) protects Cameroon's bilingual and [bi-jural](#) status; its Southwest and Northwest regions adhere to English common law, while other regions follow French civil law. Despite constitutional guarantees, however, English speakers have long argued that the central government discriminates against them. Since the [1990s](#), Anglophone political parties have pushed for a return to federated government or outright independence.

Current Protests: Old Grievances, New Tactics

The current crisis began in October 2016, when [lawyers and teachers](#) went on strike to protest the placement of French-speaking lawyers in common law courts and French-speaking teachers in Anglophone schools. By December, protests had spread from Bamenda, the largest Anglophone city in the Northwest region, to Buea, capital of the Southwest region. As commenters have [noted](#), because political cooperation between the regions is historically rare, the connected protests put increased pressure on the central government.

The current protests are also taking place in a time of increased government repression. An [anti-terrorism law](#), created in December 2014 in response to the threat from Boko Haram, has been used to stop political parties from meeting and to jail Anglophone activists.

On [January 17, 2017](#), three activists who organized the protests were arrested under this law and are currently being tried in a military tribunal, where they face the death penalty. While civil society groups have [protested](#) the activists' arrest, in a speech, [President Paul Biya](#) maintained the prosecution is "necessary."

More intrusively, on January 16, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications issued a [statement](#) notifying social media users that their posts risked criminal prosecution. Some protesters reported receiving [threatening text messages](#) from the government. The following day, at the direction of the central government, internet providers [shut off](#) service in Anglophone regions. Currently, the internet remains blocked, despite criticism from the [UN](#) and [civil society organizations](#).

Standoff Has Larger Economic and Political Concerns

The continued standoff between protesters and the government carries economic and political costs. The internet ban is disrupting business and communication. Civil servants have not been [paid](#), banks' online systems are not working, and ATMs are reportedly closed. The organization [Internet sans frontières](#), estimated that the first 15 days of the internet shutdown cost the country \$723,000 in lost revenue.

The protests also pose a political risk to President Biya, who will likely run for a [fifth term](#) in 2018. The government's reaction to protests has drawn further attention to Anglophone grievances. Activists using the Twitter hashtag [#BringBackOurInternet](#) have generated global interest in the crisis by linking it to larger issues of internet freedom. While international attention is unlikely to translate to an electoral threat to Biya, who has been in power since 1984, backlash against continued government repression may help strengthen the opposition.

Conclusion

Although Anglophone political dissent is not new, the scale of the current protests, coupled with the severity of the government response, has created a situation that is proving difficult to resolve. Central government efforts to repress dissent have so far failed, helping fuel domestic protest and generating international censure.

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A woman poses in front of ECOWAS Senegalese troops near to the state house in the Gambian capital Banjul, Sunday January 22, 2017, one day after Gambia's defeated leader Yahya Jammeh went into exile. (Source: AP Photo/Jerome Delay.)

Background

Located in West Africa, The Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa. It has a population of around 2 million and is entirely surrounded by Senegal. As highlighted in the December 8, 2016, [edition](#) of *Africa Watch*, Jammeh came to power via a military coup in 1994. His 22 years in power, which pushed the country in an authoritarian direction, were marked by successive coup attempts, restrictions on democratic expression, and human rights violations. In 2011, Jammeh declared that he would rule for “a [billion](#) years,” and in 2015 he announced that the country would become an Islamic republic. In 2016, Jammeh [promised](#) to pull out of the International Criminal Court. Jammeh's increasingly impulsive and authoritarian rule left The Gambia isolated.

Leadership Crisis

In The Gambia's 2016 elections, a united coalition of opposition parties, led by Barrow, surprised many by [capturing](#) 45 percent of the vote, with Jammeh taking only 36 percent. After reneging on his agreement to concede defeat, Jammeh [declared](#) a state of emergency and unilaterally extended his rule for another three months, but faced concerted domestic, regional, and international pressure to hand over the reins of power. ECOWAS quickly launched a high-level mediation effort aimed at convincing Jammeh to step down. The effort was [supported](#) by a wide array of international actors, including the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States. Compounding this outside pressure, many of Jammeh's top domestic allies began to abandon him—half of his government resigned, including his [vice-president](#) since 1997, Isatou Njie-Saidy.

ECOWAS Intervention

Fearing for his life, Barrow [fled](#) to Senegal in mid-January, where he was sworn into office at the Gambian embassy on January 19. Amid news of a looming regional military intervention, up to 45,000 refugees also flowed across the border to Senegal. Although the military appeared to back Jammeh for much of December and January, on the eve of the ECOWAS intervention, The Gambia's army chief General Ousman Badjie pledged his [allegiance](#) to the freshly inaugurated Barrow: “We are going to welcome them [the ECOWAS force] with flowers and make them a cup of tea.” The ECOWAS force was [composed](#) of troops mostly from Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, and Ghana. The Nigerian Air Force contributed 200 troops as well as aviation assets, including combat aircraft. When ECOWAS troops eventually entered The Gambia on January 19, they faced no resistance from the Gambian military.

The ECOWAS contingent stopped short of marching on the capital, Banjul, to allow for a final, and ultimately successful, mediation attempt. Under the terms of the [deal](#), Jammeh agreed to step down but would be afforded all the rights of a former president—including immunity from prosecution unless two-thirds of the national assembly votes to override—and would be allowed to keep some of his wealth, including a fleet of luxury cars. After the deal, reports [emerged](#) that Jammeh may have emptied the state coffers before he departed, taking up to \$11 million with him to Equatorial Guinea.

Conclusion

On January 26, as Barrow returned to The Gambia and was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of thousands, he [announced](#): “The rule of fear has been banished from The Gambia for good.” While Barrow’s incoming government faces enormous [challenges](#) in reviving the economy and transitioning the country toward a functioning democracy, The Gambia’s transfer of power—and ECOWAS’s strong push to respect the election results—holds [promise](#) for the deepening of democracy in the region.

ECOWAS has a history of interventions in the name of democracy in the region, starting with the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. Indeed, in 1999, ECOWAS went so far as to proclaim its right to intervene in the region with the adoption of the [Protocol](#) on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security. These norms, and the demonstrated willingness to back them up with actions as in The Gambia, stand in contrast to other African regional bodies, which have been less willing to defend electoral successes by opposition parties, as exemplified by the Southern African Development Community’s [handling](#) of Zimbabwe’s 2008 elections.

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