
Revisiting Cameroon’s Social Contract amid Conflicts and Polycrisis through a Sovereign National Dialogue

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon is beset by deepening insecurity that is reshaping how citizens perceive and engage in political life. Often dubbed “Africa in miniature,” the country now risks sliding into a full-blown polycrisis, driven by overlapping ethno-political tensions, transnational insurgency, separatist conflict, diaspora militancy, and a volatile power-transition marked by post-electoral disputes. Opposition figure Issa Tchiroma Bakary continues to contest the Constitutional Council’s declaration of Paul Biya as winner of the 2025 presidential election (DW 2025). As a result, public trust in state institutions is eroding, widening the gap between citizens and the state and underscoring the urgent need to renegotiate the social contract.

A polycrisis is both a concept and an analytical framework. As a concept, it captures the interconnections among multiple crises; as a framework, it helps explain their causal linkages (Lawrence et al. 2024). The term describes a “complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and a general planetary crisis” (Lawrence et al. 2024: 2). This brief applies the polycrisis

lens to Cameroon, examining how intersecting challenges are eroding the very foundation of the state—the social contract.

In Cameroon’s polycrisis, major ethnic groups vie for state power, Boko Haram destabilizes the Far North, separatist forces contest control of the North West and South West regions to form the state of Ambazonia and the diaspora-based Brigade Anti-Sardinard (BAS) movement aggressively pushes for top-level political change.

Cameroon’s polycrisis highlights the urgent need to revisit the social contract underpinning the state. Political thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasised the social contract as the foundation of the polis and, by extension, the modern state formalized in Westphalia in 1648. The theory explains the origin of civil society, addressing how societies should be formed and organized (Nathanaël 2025). At its core, the social contract posits that states arise from mutual agreements among citizens who determine governance, underscoring the central role of the people in shaping the political community. Revisiting Cameroon’s

social contract is therefore essential to resolving the current stalemate, ideally through a sovereign national dialogue—one initiated, led, and owned by Cameroonians without external interference.

National dialogues are recognized in conflict-affected societies as vital for inclusive exchanges, particularly engaging women, youth, and marginalized groups (UNICEF 2021). This brief examines why conflicts persist in Cameroon despite multiple dialogues, from the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s to the 2019 Major National Dialogue. It seeks to answer: Why do conflicts endure, and what path can lead to a renewed social order? Understanding Cameroon’s social contract and its key inflection points is the first step.

Cameroon’s political formation reflects decades of contestation, conquest, and uneven political negotiations. Key fractures in the post-colonial social contract include:

- (1)** The unconstitutional dismantling of the 1961 federal state, which sparked the Anglophone conflict.
- (2)** Politicized ethnicity, fostering patronage networks and undermining national cohesion.
- (3)** State neglect of the peripheries, creating security vacuums exploited by armed groups.

Cameroon’s contemporary state crisis stems from a breach of the historic social

contract that underpinned the formation of a modern state. The transition from federalism to a unitary system violated this contract. By unilaterally dismantling the federal state, the Anglophone minority, initially equal partners in the union with French Cameroon, felt annexed by a Francophone-dominated state, giving rise to the Anglophone problem. This underlies the country’s most pressing security challenge today, driven by feelings of marginalization and exclusion among Cameroonians of Anglo identity, which has hindered national unity and integration (Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997). Among the multiple crises afflicting the country, the Anglophone conflict is central, shaping the state’s formation and exemplifying what this brief defines as a polycrisis. Addressing it requires an authentic, sovereign dialogue among Cameroonians, culminating in a renewed social contract.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This policy brief adopted a qualitative research approach and case study design. It relied on secondary data from institutional reports, policy briefs and peer-reviewed articles. Key reports include those from International Crisis Group and UNICEF and the 1996 revised constitution of Cameroon. The thematic method was used in analyzing data.

3. KEY INSIGHTS

Politicized ethnicity has entrenched patronage networks and weakened national cohesion.

Ethnicity plays a central role in Cameroon's political landscape. With over 240 ethnic groups, political alliances and rivalries often follow ethnic lines, particularly in the struggle for state power. The politicization of ethnicity frequently fuels tension and occasional violence, especially during presidential elections when voting aligns with ethnic loyalty.

For example, the 2018 presidential election heightened tensions between the Beti-Bulu (perceived supporters of Paul Biya) and the Bamileke (perceived supporters of Maurice Kamto) (International Crisis Group 2020). Similarly, the 2019 inter-communal clash in Sangmelima, Southern region of the country illustrates how ethnic politicization drives conflict, reinforcing Cameroon's broader polycrisis.

State neglect in peripheral regions has created security vacuums exploited by armed groups.

Cameroon's polycrisis is intensified by weak state presence and institutional flaws stemming from poor governance, particularly in the Far North and East. Since 2014, the country has battled the Boko Haram insurgency in the Far north region, following the Lake Chad Basin Commission's declaration of war against the group from

northeastern Nigeria. Factors such as poverty, weak governance, and entrenched radical Islam have enabled the insurgency's spread (International Crisis Group, 2016). After pledging allegiance to the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2015, Boko Haram's attacks escalated, with 425 incidents recorded in 2022 alone, killing scores of civilians and displacing over 278,000 (U.S. Department of State 2022; Human Rights Watch 2023). Inter-communal clashes between Choa Arabs and Musgum communities over resources further heighten insecurity.

In the East, instability stems largely from spillover of the 2013 Central African Republic civil war. The region has absorbed over 332,000 refugees (UNHCR 2025), while disputes over natural resources—especially between artisanal miners and multinational companies, often linked to corruption—further exacerbate tensions, reflecting the country's broader polycrisis.

The abolition of Federalism triggered Anglophone grievances and sustained armed conflict.

What can be described as the state crisis in contemporary Cameroon is a function of a breach of the historic social contract to forge and sustain a modern state in Cameroon. The argument is that the transition of the state from federalism to a unitary state contravened the social contract. By unilaterally dismantling the federal state, the Anglophone minority who came in as equals in the union with French

Cameroon felt annexed by the Francophone dominated state thereby creating what is today known as the Anglophone problem in Cameroon

Since 2017, this has escalated into a separatist conflict in the Anglophone regions. What began as peaceful protests by lawyers and teachers against the erosion of Anglo-Saxon legal and educational systems intensified following the government's heavy-handed response. The conflict has resulted in over 6,000 deaths, 592,600 internally displaced persons, and 77,400 refugees in Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2022). Mediation efforts, including Swiss- and Canadian-led initiatives, have stalled, and the 2019 Major National Dialogue has yet to produce meaningful change, as the conflict continues into its eighth year.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

A sovereign national dialogue offers the most viable pathway to renegotiating the social contract.

A sovereign national dialogue, grounded in the Constitution, offers a viable path toward a new social contract to address Cameroon's polycrisis. The Constitution affirms popular sovereignty and empowers citizens to decide on matters of national significance, including via referendum (Article 36, 1996 revised Constitution). Such a dialogue could enable constitutional reform and institutional restructuring to tackle structural drivers of conflict,

including ethno-political tensions and the Anglophone crisis. Legally grounded, locally owned, and people-centered, it promises greater inclusivity than past initiatives.

Unlike the 2019 Major National Dialogue, criticized for its narrow focus and limited impact, a comprehensive sovereign dialogue would engage all segments of Cameroonian society and address the full spectrum of grievances. Key actions could include:

- (1)** Convening an independent, sovereign national dialogue.
- (2)** Reforming the constitutional foundations of the state.
- (3)** Strengthening inclusive governance and accountability mechanisms.
- (4)** Prioritizing development and state presence in marginalized regions.

By ensuring broad participation across regions, identities, and political affiliations, this process can establish a renewed social contract capable of mitigating Cameroon's polycrisis.

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