Cameroon: Background to a Crisis

by Pierre Englebert

Located on the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa, Cameroon is a country with a mixed colonial heritage, parts or all of its territory having been administered at one time or another by Germany, France, and Britain. Sometimes referred to as an “Africa in miniature,” Cameroon is socially diverse, comprising various ethnic groups of West and Central African descent, adherents of Islam and Christianity, and speakers of French, English, and numerous African languages.

Once one of Africa’s outstanding success stories, blending economic growth and political stability in a continent short of both, Cameroon now faces serious economic difficulties and a crisis of political legitimacy.

The Historical Sequence, 1472-1985

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to set foot in Cameroon. Sometime around 1472, they provided the territory with its future name by designating as Rio dos Camares what is today the Wouri river, a reference to the waterway’s crawfish mistakenly thought to be shrimp (camarões). Bismarck’s Germany became the first colonial occupant with the establishment of the so-called Kamerun protectorate in 1884. The three decades of German rule were marked both by repression and by the development of modern infrastructure. In 1916, midway in World War I, French, Belgian, and British troops forced the surrender of the German governor. The League of Nations subsequently granted France a mandate over four-fifths of the territory and Britain a mandate over the remaining western fifth, made up of two separate regions along the Nigerian border (see Mark W. DeLancey, Cameroon: Dependence and Independence [Westview Press, 1989] for details and maps).

After World War II the mandates became UN trust territories. In the French area, where a system of direct rule and centralized administration prevailed, Catholicism gained considerable numbers of converts in the south while a larger share of power was delegated to local authorities in the Muslim north. The French developed the port of Douala, upgraded the road system, and expanded cash crop production. The British ruled indirectly, with the collaboration of preexisting political structures. The northern British segment was administered as a part of Nigeria. In the southern segment, an influx of Nigerian immigrants found work in plantations, contributing to the integration of the two subregions.

By redirecting agricultural resources toward cash crops, both the French and the British helped establish Cameroon’s international role as an exporter of raw materials.
The Rise of Ahmadou Ahidjo. Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Muslim Fulani with little formal education, was born in the northern town of Garoua in 1924. Under the terms of a 1956 French law (the loi cadre) providing for local governance in most of France’s African colonies, a government was established in Cameroun in 1957. Ahidjo, who initially held the position of deputy prime minister, became prime minister in 1958 and subsequently created his own party, the Union Camerounaise (UC), based not so much on ideology as upon his northern constituency.

Beginning in the middle 1950s, the banned Union des Populations Camerounaises (UPC) waged guerrilla war against the French administration and called for an independent reunified Cameroon. In a politically astute move, Ahidjo collaborated with the French in repressing the UPC, while adopting the UPC’s demands for independence and the granting of amnesty to UPC members willing to renounce violence. By doing so, he weakened the UPC while enticing some of its former militants into his own constituency.

Cameroon Under Ahidjo, 1960-1982. French Cameroun became the independent Republic of Cameroon on January 1, 1960. The country’s first popular legislative elections were held in April of the same year; early the following month Prime Minister Ahidjo was elected president by a majority vote (89 percent) of the legislature. A February 1961 UN-supervised plebiscite in the British Cameroons (in which voters were not offered the option of autonomous independence) resulted in a decision by the northern segment to merge with Nigeria and a decision by the southern segment to federate with the Republic of Cameroon. On October 1, 1961, the officially bilingual Federal Republic of Cameroon came into being, with Ahidjo as the new state’s president.

To strengthen his own position and overcome the weaknesses that he associated with Cameroon’s diversity, Ahidjo opted for a centralized system of governance and an ideology of national unity. Repression and co-optation were his main tools. Leaders of the main opposition parties were arrested in 1962 for “tribalism” after they accused him of authoritarian tendencies. In 1966, the UC, which had absorbed the country’s other major parties, was renamed the Union Nationale Camerounaise (UNC)—a de facto single party. Ahidjo’s power was further enhanced in 1972, when the electorate approved a new constitution converting the federation into a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon.

Ethnicity, language, and religion were implicitly banned as political issues, although anglophone westerners continued to feel underrepresented in the state’s organs and francophones still feared possible Nigerian influence on their English-speaking compatriots. Over the next decade, repression and Cameroon’s economic success put to rest overt challenges to Ahidjo’s governance system.

The Early Biya Era, 1982-1985. Perhaps because he was falsely diagnosed by French physicians as being terminally ill, Ahidjo resigned from the presidency in November 1982 while retaining his position as chairman of the UNC. He was succeeded by his prime minister, Paul Biya, a francophone southern Catholic from the Berti ethnic group who had joined the Ahidjo administration in 1962 upon his return from attending university in France and was elevated to the position of prime minister in 1975. A technocrat by training, he entered the presidency with no constituency of his own.

Biya’s first years were uneasy. Ahidjo, having either recovered or learned that he had never been dangerously ill, attempted to orchestrate a return to power. In August 1983, Biya announced that a coup plot by Ahidjo’s supporters had been discovered. Ahidjo himself was accused and several of his former aides were arrested. From France, Ahidjo denounced Biya for fomenting trouble against the north and resigned as UNC chairman. In February 1984, Ahidjo was sentenced to death in absentia (later commuted to life imprisonment). He lived in France and Senegal until his death in November 1989 at the age of 65.

In September 1983 Biya was elected to the UNC chairmanship at a special party congress. In January 1984, he ran for president unopposed and won nearly 100 percent of the popular vote. Shortly thereafter, the National Assembly approved constitutional amendments changing the country’s name to Republic of Cameroon and abolishing the post of prime minister.

Biya’s election victory and the former ruler’s sentence were understood as signals that Biya was consolidating his rule and that his position would soon become impregnable if his opponents did not act quickly. In April 1984, remaining Ahidjo supporters in the military launched a coup attempt, which was put down after heavy fighting in the capital.

Although Biya survived these challenges with his authority stronger than ever, the unrest and its aftermath widened the rift between the country’s north and south. Both the military hierarchy and the political apparatus
were purged of most northerners in the months following the 1984 coup attempt, moves that added the resentment of northerners to the already existing alienation of western anglophones.

In 1985, in another step away from the Ahidjo era, the single governing party changed its name to the Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC), and Biya undertook to provide his regime with ideological foundations. He rejected the notion of a return to multiparty politics and announced that Cameroonians would have to settle for “communal liberalism,” a loose term denoting economic liberalism based upon supposedly traditional African communal roots.

Behind the new facade, however, Biya had in fact adopted Ahidjo’s system and reinforced both its monolithic character and the historic divisions of Cameroon’s society. See DeLancey for a more detailed exposition of the argument.

**Cameroon’s Economic Strengths**

A country of considerable geographical and climatic diversity, Cameroon is endowed with abundant natural resources. Its agricultural wealth has been supplemented since the late 1970s by profits from the exploitation of offshore oil deposits. For the most part, economic management has been conservative. With a population of some 11.5 million and a GDP of 3,420 billion CFA francs in 1989, it is categorized by the World Bank as a lower-middle-income country.

**Agriculture.** From the early days of colonization to the present, agriculture has been Cameroon’s economic mainstay. The most important exports in this category are cocoa, coffee, timber, and cotton. Cocoa output has averaged some 125,000 tons a year since 1986, making Cameroon the fourth largest African producer behind Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria. In 1987 (the last year for which complete data are available) cocoa was the main source of foreign exchange, accounting for 20 percent of total export revenues. Coffee production averages about 120,000 tons a year but can vary by as much as 55,000 tons from one year to another. Coffee accounted for 15.6 percent of total export revenues in 1987, timber for 9.7 percent, and raw cotton for 3.2 percent. Other cash crops include bananas, tobacco, palm kernels and oil, rubber, tea, and groundnuts.

Because agricultural production increases have outstripped population growth, Cameroon is one of the few African countries consistently self-sufficient in terms of food (with the exception of the 1986 drought year, though even then the country managed to be 90 percent self-sufficient). Cereals such as millet and sorghum are grown in the north; rice in the southwest; fruits, maize, and tubers in most parts of the country. Livestock adds to the food supply.

Apart from rubber and palm oil (mostly produced in state-owned plantations) and timber (essentially in the hands of foreign concerns), agricultural export production is dominated by small-scale farmers, a pattern carried forward from the colonial period. State intervention is limited and decreasing. The main instrument of state control over small producers, the marketing agency Office National de Commercialisation des Produits de Base (which has had a monopoly on marketing cocoa, coffee, cotton, groundnuts, and palm products), has been assigned a more modest role in recent years, with its functions progressively transferred to the private sector. Although world prices for many agricultural goods have substantially deteriorated since the beginning of the 1980s, Cameroonian producer prices were kept artificially high by government intervention until the late 1980s; oil revenues were sometimes used for this purpose. Not until 1989 were the producer prices for coffee, cotton, and cocoa allowed to decline.

**Oil.** Offshore oil reserves were discovered and deemed fit for commercial production by the French company Elf Aquitaine in 1976. Production began in 1977, and output has averaged between 7 and 9 million tons of crude per year since 1984. Oil soon became the most important source of foreign exchange. The secondary sector (manufacturing, mining/oil, construction, and utilities), which accounted for 18 percent of GDP in the 1978-1979 fiscal year, contributed 36 percent in 1984-1985 as the share of agriculture went down. In a country whose economy had always revolved around agricultural production, this was a massive change.

The government-owned Société Nationale des Hydrocarbures holds a 20 percent stake in all companies producing oil in Cameroon—including Elf-Serepca (a subsidiary of Elf Aquitaine), Total Cameroun (part of the French group Total), and Pecten Cameroon (a Shell subsidiary). Exploration activities were suspended when oil prices slumped in 1986 but were resumed in 1990 after the government modified its hydrocarbons investment code. A domestic refinery, Sonara, is located near Limbe and has a capacity of up to 2 million tons of crude oil a year.
Health and Education. Though Cameroon's performance in terms of health status and welfare indicators is average (infant mortality was 90 per thousand live births in 1989), its achievements in education are among the most notable in Africa. Literacy is relatively widespread. The primary school net enrollment ratio reached 78.5 percent in 1985, despite regional disparities at the expense of the nomadic north. Education has consistently been funded generously, even in times of austerity.

The Economic Crisis Begins
When Cameroon entered the oil era, its leaders wanted to avoid the pitfalls of a Nigeria-style runaway "petromoney" boom marked by inflation, neglect of the agricultural sector, excessive consumer imports, and a consequent loss of economic self-reliance. The Cameroonian government went out of its way to discourage public excitement about oil, usually withholding details of size and location in its announcements of oil finds. In an effort to maintain domestic economic stability, the government put most oil revenues in out-of-country bank accounts, particularly in the United States. (See David C. Underwood, West African Oil: Will It Matter? [Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Significant Issues Series, 1983], pp. 49-51.)

Despite these precautions, the global oil-price collapse of 1986, combined with a fall in Cameroon's production, triggered the country's worst economic crisis since independence. The oil sector could no longer shield the country from the decline in the coffee, cotton, and cocoa markets. To make matters worse, a drought was causing an unprecedented shortfall in food sufficiency, thus forcing the country to increase its imports at the very time exports were faltering. The statistics tell a somber story. Whereas annual real GDP growth had averaged 7.5 percent between the late 1970s and 1985, real GDP expanded by only 2.5 percent in 1986 and then contracted—by 5 percent in 1987, 5.9 percent in 1988, and 5.4 percent in 1989.

The oil shock made it impossible to ignore any longer certain questionable economic policies whose effects had previously been partly concealed by the inflow of petroleum revenues. Although Cameroon attempted to pursue conservative fiscal policies in the 1970s and early 1980s, the existence of these revenues eventually tempted the government into unsustainable spending.

A substantial part of the education budget, for example, went into teacher salaries and post-secondary

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Cameroon: Some Key Economic Indicators
(in $ millions unless otherwise indicated)

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<td>(billions of CFA francs)</td>
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<td>Real GDP % change</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
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<td>Population (millions)</td>
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<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.5</td>
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<td>Exports f.o.b</td>
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<td>1,689</td>
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<td>Imports f.o.b</td>
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<td>Current account</td>
<td>-551</td>
<td>-893</td>
<td>-671</td>
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<td>Total external debt</td>
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<td>4,039</td>
<td>4,225</td>
<td>4,743</td>
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<td>Debt service ratio (%)</td>
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<td>19.4</td>
<td>30.9</td>
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<td>Crude oil production</td>
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<td>(millions of tons)</td>
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<td>8.35</td>
<td>8.00</td>
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<td>Coffee production</td>
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<td>(thousands of tons)a</td>
<td>146.7</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>126.2</td>
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<td>(thousands of tons)a</td>
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<td>(CFA francs per $)</td>
<td>346.3</td>
<td>300.5</td>
<td>297.8</td>
<td>319.0</td>
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a. Figures are for crop year beginning in calendar year.

Sources: Economist Intelligence Unit and author's estimates (1990 figures mostly provisional and estimates).
The reform program has yielded few concrete results. For example, the SNI, which was to be restructured, has been allowed to operate as in the past. The government has also hesitated to cut its labor force (the total number of public sector employees has actually increased since 1987) or salaries (not until mid-1991 were some perquisites of senior civil servants reduced).

As a consequence of Cameroon’s failure to fulfill its side of its bargain, the IMF suspended payment of the third tranche of its standby agreement, which eventually expired at the end of June 1990. The World Bank and the ADB also suspended disbursements in 1990 for similar reasons. Windfall profits generated by increased oil prices in the second half of 1990 eased both the budgetary and balance of payments situations and temporarily reduced the pressure on the government to face additional difficult decisions.

Some progress did take place in such areas as the design of a free-trade zone, the formulation of a new investment code, and the privatization campaign. In response to these steps, the World Bank reluctantly agreed in April 1991 to disburse the second tranche of its SAL, only to suspend all disbursements on project and program lending in May after Cameroon defaulted on the servicing of its debt to the Bank. As a consequence of the IMF’s disengagement, Cameroon had been unable to convene a meeting of the Paris Club to reschedule some of its debt.

Growing Popular Disillusionment. Popular expectations of employment and political participation deriving from Cameroon’s past successes have created growing political problems for the government. The economic shock that began in 1986 has led to the gradual emergence of previously latent or suppressed opposition forces, a reduced public tolerance for repression, and a new focus on ethnic and linguistic differences. All this, in turn, has fed back into the economy, which has undergone further deterioration since June 1991 because of a political protest campaign discouraging economic activity (the so-called “Ghost Town” tactic) and encouraging citizens to boycott tax payments and withdraw their deposits from the banking system.

Political Breakdown (1990-1991)

In 1990, as democratization movements were sweeping Eastern Europe and parts of Africa, the monolithic system established by Ahmadou and adopted by Biya began to disintegrate. Yondo Black, a former president of the country’s bar association, was among several persons arrested in February 1990 for attempting to form a political party. This did not discourage Nkosi John Nku Ndu, an anglophone bookstore owner in the northwestern town of Bamenda, from organizing a rally in May to inaugurate his own party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), which supports economic liberalization. A security forces raid on the rally left a reported six demonstrators dead. In the same month, disturbances at the University of Yaoundé (where students fear for their scholarships and their future...
Amadou Ndam Njoya, also a former minister in the Ahidjo government, was a former secretary-general to the presidency under Ahidjo. The formation of political parties, yet forbidding those of ethnic or regional character. By mid-January 1991, there were an estimated 20 new political parties; by June there were about 30. A significant new group was the Union Nationale pour la Democratie et le Progres (UNDP), led by Samuel Eboua, a former secretary-general to the presidency under Ahidjo and a minister under Biya until 1983. The UNDP soon appeared to be representing the interests of destitute former Ahidjo elites and northerners from areas which had benefited from public spending on infrastructure under the former president. Another major new party was the Union Democratique du Cameroun (UDC), led by Amadou Ndam Njoya, also a former minister in the Ahidjo government. Of all parties, the UPC, SDF, UNDP, and UDC have remained the most representative.

In January 1991, Celestin Monga, a renowned economist, was detained for 48 hours after publishing an article critical of the president, triggering a major demonstration in his support. In April, in an attempt to placate northern discontent, the post of prime minister was restored; the president appointed to this position Sadou Hayatou, a northerner from Garoua, previously the secretary-general to the presidency. This gesture failed to co-opt the north and further alienated the western Bamileké, a group with a vigorous entrepreneurial culture, largely excluded from power and suffering from the economic slump. In May, four students were allegedly killed at the University of Yaoundé when police intervened to suppress demonstrations. The university was then closed.

Around the end of April, the opposition began to articulate its demands in a more coherent and organized way. A number of groups formed a National Coordination Committee of Opposition Parties that demanded the convening of a "national conference." This concept, apparently first raised in Cameroon by Yondo Black in late 1990, was modeled on a gathering that took place in Benin in February 1990; similar meetings subsequently took place in a number of other francophone African countries.

The idea is to convene all political and social forces and other representative groups in a sovereign national forum in order to (1) investigate the past and present management of the country, (2) formulate constitutional reforms to be voted on in a popular referendum, and (3) appoint a transitional government to lead the country to general free elections. In Benin and Congo, the conferences stippled Presidents Mathieu Kerekou and Denis Sassou-Nguesso of most of their powers and imposed governments led by opposition figures pending elections. In Gabon, on the other hand, President Omar Bongo managed to prevent his country’s national conference from becoming sovereign and saved most of his powers. To the extent that they believe it can help explain the inconsistency between the country’s resources and its current economic problems, Cameroonian place high expectations on the investigative dimension of a national conference. This may also help explain the government’s opposition to such a conference.

Responding to the Biya government’s refusal to set a date for a national conference, opposition leaders met in Bamenda in May 1991 and decided on a program of action that included a “Ghost Town, Ghost Country” campaign for May 16-17 during which people would stay at home and shops would be closed. In June, the Coordination Committee launched the Yaoundé Plan of Action, which called for an economic blockade of the capital, strengthening of the “Ghost Town, Ghost Country” movement (the country would be under effective general strike every week from Monday to Friday until the government’s approval of a national conference), and a march on the presidential palace on July 5.

In an address to the National Assembly a few days later, Biya dismissed the national conference proposal as irrelevant and challenged the opposition to confront him in legislative elections then planned for late 1991. Several people died in clashes with police during demonstrations in Douala after the president’s speech, which was widely regarded as provocative and condescending. The government also banned the July march and employed roadblocks and a military buildup in the capital to make it virtually impossible for opponents to enter the city.

The failure of the opposition to shut down Yaoundé or carry out its march on the presidential palace created confusion within the Coordination Committee and encouraged the government to remain defiant. From mid-July onward, the Ghost Country campaign faltered in varying degrees in the rest of the country.

The government outlawed the Coordination Committee in July, arrested opposition leaders, and banned six organizations. Although President Biya held several meetings with collaborating opposition leaders and ethnic elites during the same month, he refused to meet the Coordination Committee leaders except on a one-to-one basis, which the Committee rejected. August was marked by a series of usually brief detentions of several opposition leaders and by violent government-protester clashes in various towns. In September, Biya began holding consultations in Douala and other parts of the country to demonstrate that the government was neither intimidated by the opposition nor bottled up in Yaoundé.

Although still formally committed to its civil disobedience campaign, the Coordination Committee became clearly perplexed by August because of the limited success of its actions and the continuing inflexibility of the Biya administration. The effectiveness of Ghost Town became increasingly restricted to Bamenda and the western town of Bafoussam. In Douala,
The blockade of the port and airport failed, and taxis frequently resumed operating. Calls for boycotting the start of the new school year in October were also dropped.

In a relatively conciliatory speech to the nation on October 11, Biya announced that legislative elections would take place in February 1992 and called for a tripartite meeting of representatives of all political parties, "independent personalities," and delegates of the government for the purpose of creating a joint commission to draft an electoral code and a law regulating access to the media by the opposition. Though the president's proposition fell far short of the demand for a sovereign national conference, the opposition nevertheless agreed to meet with Prime Minister Hayatou.

The tripartite meeting that started on October 30, 1991, did not yield any significant breakthrough but opened the way to direct bilateral talks between Hayatou and the opposition in the following days. A declaration was issued on November 13 in which government and opposition expressed their intention to lower social tensions through reciprocal concessions. In return for an end to Ghost Town, the government would grant a tax moratorium to the businesses affected by the Ghost Town campaign, lift its ban on public meetings and freedom of association, and release detained opponents. No mention was made of the national conference, though the declaration did set up a committee charged with debating the country's constitutional future.

The declaration was signed by 40 parties, including the UNDP, UDC, and UPC, but not the SDF. The SDF's abstention brought to the surface a preexisting schism within the opposition between francophone parties whose leaders participated at some point or another in the Ahidjo and/or Biya regimes, and anglophone parties whose leaders are politically "virgin." This apparent split

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**Some of the Key Players in the Months Ahead**

**Paul Biya.** The leadership skill of Cameroon's president has been called into question by both his opponents and supporters at home and abroad. He has opposed the national conference, allegedly against the advice of many senior government and party members who were hoping for a "soft landing" on the Gabonese model. He is rumored to have contingency plans for fleeing the country should his regime lose control of Yaoundé.

**Gilbert Andzé Tsoungui.** As minister of territorial administration, he has been responsible for measures such as the deployment of the military in major cities and the banning of opposition groups. He is feared by the opposition as the strongman of Biya's regime. As minister of defense in 1984, he organized the repression against northerners after the coup attempt and purged the military. The latter institution has not been a political force thus far during the current crisis but pressures to intervene may mount if the situation worsens.

**Sadou Hayatou.** Biya's prime minister has lost much credibility in recent months and is mostly regarded as a buffer for the president. Related to the Muslim hierarchy of the northern town of Garoua, he has reportedly offered his resignation to Biya at least once and may not personally oppose the national conference.

**Ni John Fru Ndi.** The head of the small Parti Progressiste, he is a former "baron" of the ruling RDPC, which he only abandoned in May 1991 to create his own party. The Parti Progressiste, which calls for a national conference, does not have the membership of the UNDP, the SDF, or the UPC, but its leader is seen as influential and knowledgeable about the Biya regime.

**Jean-Jacques Ekindi.** The head of the small Parti Progressiste, he is a former "baron" of the ruling RDPC, which he only abandoned in May 1991 to create his own party. The Parti Progressiste, which calls for a national conference, does not have the membership of the UNDP, the SDF, or the UPC, but its leader is seen as influential and knowledgeable about the Biya regime.

**Ngouo Woungly Massaga.** Formerly secretary-general of the UPC, in exile for some 30 years, he resigned in late 1990 after his performance was criticized at a party congress in Luanda. He then asked Biya for permission to return to Cameroon and founded his party, the Parti de la Solidarité du Peuple (PSP), in early 1991. The PSP is closer to the RDPC than to the rest of the opposition and does not back the idea of a national conference.

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in the opposition, though perhaps temporary, highlights the
underlying divisions of Cameroonian society and
superimposes a historic linguistic conflict on a
government-opposition confrontation. By doing so, it
revealed an implicit alliance between those who are and
those who once were involved in the state apparatus, a
delayed effect of Ahidjo's old co-optation strategy.

It should be stressed, however, that the declaration
only provided for the creation of a committee in which
potential concessions would be traded. It did not seal an
agreement that these concessions would be made, much
less implemented. The Ghost Town campaign was
therefore still officially on the opposition's agenda.

What Next?
Cameroon's economic and political crisis is ongoing.
The Ghost Town campaign has pushed the economy and
state finances further into the red. The government's
pro-southern bias and the stresses imposed by hard times
seem to have moved the country farther away from real
unity than at any time in its postindependence history.
Although there is not ethnic conflict as such in
Cameroon, ethnic tension is high and it is no longer
uncommon to see people returning to their region of
ethnic origin out of a sense of vulnerability at finding
themselves part of a minority.

The attitude of Cameroon's main foreign backers,
France and the United States, will be of paramount
importance to the country's short-term political future.
France has historically been a strong supporter of the
present regime, and the French factor is perceived by the
opposition as a crucial reason for Biya's political
longevity. While encouraging change in other African
countries such as Benin and Mali, France has been much
more cautious in the case of Cameroon. The absence of
a strong francophile alternative to Biya and the national
appeal of the anglophone Ni John Fru Ndi may explain
the French hesitation on pushing for reform.

The generally high profile in Yaoundé of U.S.
Ambassador Frances D. Cook, Washington's forgiveness
of Cameroon's bilateral debt despite the country's

middle-income status, and a private visit of President Biya
to the United States in May 1991—during which he met
President Bush and was awarded an honorary doctorate
by the University of Maryland—have been repeatedly
cited by Cameroon's official and opposition media as
evidence of U.S. support for the Biya regime. But recent
meetings between embassy personnel and opposition
leaders as well as the cancellation of a trip to Yaoundé by
Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman
Cohen are indicators that Washington may be more
evenhanded than the Biya government is willing to admit.
Although acknowledging that Cameroon is considered a
"friend," senior State Department officials have also stressed
U.S. concerns about Cameroon's human rights record.

The February 1992 legislative elections (whose timing may
slip still farther) will be the next major test for both opposition
and government. If agreement on a national conference or
some other form of constitutional reform is not reached, a
boycott by the opposition parties is a possibility. Such an
eventuality might hand the RDPC a nominal victory but could
also inflict a fatal blow to the institutions of the
republic—threatening the future of a country where
state-building has historically been mistaken for nation-building.

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