

RESOLVING THE CONFLICT IN THE FORMER BRITISH SOUTHERN CAMEROONS:

- FROM ARUSHA TO JO'BURG: ANY PROSPECTS?

By Collins CHE (19/04/2025)

INTRODUCTION:

This weekend (18th to 21st April 2025), a summit christened the Southern Cameroons Leadership Summit was scheduled to take place in Arusha, Tanzania. Early this month, the venue was changed from Arusha to Johannesburg, South Africa, citing mainly two reasons. Firstly, from a logistics standpoint, Jo'burg offered some advantages over Arusha, with ease of direct flights for delegates attending from Europe and North America, its relative proximity to delegates from Southern Africa, and the acceptance of a renowned Pretoria-based institute to facilitate the visa and related logistic requirements.

Secondly, some of the key international speakers at the summit are based in South Africa, thus making it easier and cost-saving for the organisers. Prominent amongst them are:

- 1) Mr Roelof Meyer who was the Chief Negotiator during the late eighties and nineties at the peace talks that led to the transition from the Apartheid era to a democratic South Africa. Mr. Meyer will be speaking on "Lessons from the South African Transition from Apartheid to Democracy".
- 2) Ms Corlett Letlojane, Director, Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA), who will be speaking on 'Building Networks . . .' Ms Letlojane has been to Cameroon twice during the past eight years, within the framework of the so-called Anglophone crises, and has first-hand experience of the crises; and
- 3) Ms Miriam Saohatse, a Former National Executive Committee Member of the African National Congress (ANC), a party that was the vanguard in the Anti-Apartheid struggle during the 20th century.

The summit is being organized by the Southern Cameroons Caucuses, an initiative led by the Southern Cameroons Alliance (SCA).

The participants aim to brainstorm and come to terms on a comprehensive strategy whose implementation, they hope, will eventually contribute in no small measure to bring an end to the conflict that has been ravaging the South West and North West regions of Cameroon (**former** British Southern Cameroons, **BSC**) during the past eight years and counting.

They are aiming for a strategy that will bring an end to the conflict on the basis of the principles of TRUTH, JUSTICE, PEACE and SECURITY. This article examines the prospects of the SCA initiative and the challenges likely to be faced.

WHAT ARE THE CAUCUSES?

The Southern Cameroons Caucuses is an initiative of the Southern Cameroons Alliance (SCA) whose Chairman is Millan Atam and the Secretary General is Becky Luma. The Caucuses officially came into existence on 31/12/2024 following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by persons who represented groups with various ideological leanings.

The initiative comprises the following:

- 1) ***Pro-Independence Caucus:*** This brings various independentist groups together under the same umbrella. The SCPC currently comprises the largest group in this caucus. They seek independence as the best and just solution for the conflict. They were represented in the MOU by Gideon Annu and Eleanor Hagen.
- 2) ***Pro-Federalist Caucus:*** This comprises groups that seek a federal system of government in Cameroon as the solution to the current conflict. The Chair is Michael Egbe Takie.
- 3) ***Civil Society Caucus:*** This comprises ordinary members of the civil society with no professed political leanings. They militate within the caucuses purely and exclusively as members of the civil society. They are generally neutral, but even if they had any affiliation (independentist, federalist or unionist), the operational modalities of the caucus initiative do not allow them acting in any other capacity than as members of the civil society who are expected to give a balanced view of the situation in the North West and South West regions, without prejudice or bias. The chair is Rev. Ncham Godwill, a former President of the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC).

The signing of the MOU on 31/12/2024 was the culmination of eleven months of various activities (that included consultations, meetings, a survey, etc.) quietly undertaken by the SCA since January 2024. The survey took place in June 2024 and spanned the thirty days of the month. The findings were published in July 2024. Respondents were drawn from denizens of the Former British Southern Cameroons (BSC) and included mainly those who, at the time of the survey, resided in the North West & South West regions (the conflict zone), the eight other regions of Cameroon, other African countries, North America and Europe but also a few respondents from Australia and a few Asian countries.

Amongst other findings, the majority of respondents expressed the need for dialogue and increased collaboration not only amongst pro-independence groups but also between the latter and groups that did not necessarily share the independence ideology, provided the collaboration worked towards fostering the welfare and self-determination quest of the former BSC.

The signing of the MOU was, thus, in line with findings of the survey and represents an attempt by the SCA to proceed beyond ideological lines and, together with its partners, provide a broad-based guidance and roadmap towards a long-lasting resolution of the conflict. This is especially pertinent when one considers that it was a crisis based on

differences in ideology that quickly degenerated into a conflict in 2016/2017 arguably due to the heavy-handed response of the Cameroon government. Hence, to provide a long-lasting solution to such a conflict, it would be worthwhile considering an approach that involves talking to persons in the middle (Civil Society) and also to those with the opposing ideology (Federalists), in an attempt to bridge the gap.

Moreso, the frontline pro-independence groups and IG's (Interim Governments) have woefully failed to form a united front even after several meetings (in Europe, USA, Canada) during the past six years. On the contrary, more (Ambazonia) governments come into existence each new day, totalling at least SIX at the moment and, thus, casting doubts as to whether some of the pro-independence groups are truly fighting for the interests of the people they claim to represent or merely there to project themselves and their interests.

MIXED REACTIONS:

Plausible and logical as the caucus initiative might be, it has received mixed reactions from various quarters, ranging from massive approval, through cautious optimism, to outright rejection by a few. The reactions from denizens of the former Southern Cameroons have been largely positive, with most openly expressing the hope that the caucus initiative will not compromise the quest for independence, as opposed to those who crave for federalism or might be okay with the government's Special Status.

On the side of caution, a senior figure of one of the IG's (names withheld), while not outrightly rejecting the initiative, expressed a worry that it might end up giving the Federalists more legitimacy and better recognition over the pro-Independence viewpoint.

On the international scene, when officially notified in February this year of the MOU and the plans for the Arusha summit by the Caucus representatives in the UK, the reply of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London was essentially one of 'cautious optimism'. They heralded the idea of Southern Cameroonians of diverse ideologies first talking to themselves (and coming to terms on key issues) before reaching out to the International Community. For now, the Secretariat would closely observe the initiative and what comes out of it, they essentially stated. The reply of the European Union via the Caucus representative in Brussels was essentially similar to that of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

A view of rejection has been expressed by a few Southern Cameroonians who are pessimistic if anything good could come out of groups with markedly different ideologies and end goals. For example, in a paper entitled "The Inadvisability and Futility of Encounter between Independentists and Dependents" and published on 28 March 2025 in Pretoria, South Africa, Professor Carlson Anyangwe wrote lengthily and coherently as to why there is no basis for an encounter between independentists and federalists (whom he described in the paper as 'dependents'). The venerated professor gives some very compelling arguments to justify his assertion and one must be honest to admit that, based purely on the merits of the paper, we could say that there is no basis for the SCA and the

independence caucus to talk with federalists. (More so, the paper raises some very strong arguments that federalists need to reflect on as food for thought if they hope to make an imprint.)

However, it is always helpful to look at things in context. Looking in retrospect, it can also be argued that the several meetings amongst pro-independence groups during the past five years have ended in relative futility and the independence movements have arguably lost more grounds during this period than they have gained. More so, the caucus initiative is not just about federalists and independentists. There is also the neutral civil society which is a very important element in the equation and, unfortunately, often overlooked by both the Cameroon government and separatists.

If the pro-independence movements and governments want to be taken seriously by anyone on Planet Earth, then a good starting point would be to merge their six or more virtual governments and more than twenty movements into one or just a few. The current hydra head leadership scene paints a scenario of potential power tussle by 'grandstanders' and hegemonies that could be worse than South Sudan if, by some means, the Southern Cameroons could be granted full independence today.

A more leftist view has been expressed by social media blogger, Fabiano Deco (himself a denizen of the former BSC). In a 10-minute video posted on his YouTube channel on 01 April 2025 entitled "Milan Atam On A Mission?", he alleges, in relation to the Caucus initiative, that the SCA Chairman Millan Atam has gone into romance with Maurice Kamto of the MRC and Joshua Osih of the SDF, two prominent opposition party leaders in Cameroon, so that, together, they could fight for a federation within a one-and-indivisible Cameroon.

Watching the 10-minute video, which was more of an emotional ranting, Fabiano fails to present any proof to back up his allegation. His allegation simply seems to stem more from his dislike for the fact that Millan's SCA dares speak to Federalists whose ideology runs contrary to his. That, in Fabiano's interpretation, implies getting into bed with opposition figures in Cameroon, a line of reasoning which, at best, is deeply flawed. Fabiano also fails to acknowledge the presence and potential role of the Civil Society caucus in the initiative.

And it is not a phenomenon unique to Fabiano. It is a common phenomenon in the Southern Cameroons conflict that whenever one's approach differs from that of (other) independentists, the former is quickly labelled with a negative tag, without any evidence to back up the claim. And this has certainly not helped the struggle, as arguably opportunist "Independence" leaders have also taken advantage of that strategy to discredit activists whom they see as a potential threat to their hegemony and grandstanding.

If anyone has fully experienced this, it is Millan Atam. His time with Julius Ayuk Tabe as President of the IG arguably produced the most remarkable progress during the past eight years in the pro-independence movements. However, he was later accused of betraying Ayuk Tabe who was arrested in Abuja and brought to Yaoundé in what is known today as the

Nera-10 arrests, an accusation that was most probably a ploy to sow discord and confusion amongst pro-Independence activists (and, over the years, it seems to have worked so well). This accusation turned out to be totally false and the unfolding of events over the past seven years have fully vindicated Mr Atam. However, none of the Ambazonia frontline leaders who helped peddle such lies has ever come out to apologise for their defamation of his person.

Not that there's anything wrong in talking to Maurice Kamto or Joshua Osih or, indeed, to anyone who can help proffer solutions to the conflict. But allegations or assertions should not be based on mere speculations but rather on facts. And, unfortunately, in this allegation, Fabiano is very, very wrong about his insinuation on alliances between the SCA and Professor Kamto, Joshua Osih (or, indeed, any political figure in Cameroon). Same goes for all others peddling such false information all in a bit to discredit the Caucus initiative.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE SUMMIT:

For now, expectations from the summit could only be a matter of speculation, until such time as the participants choose to make public the resolutions of the summit. However, it would be logical to expect that the caucuses shall deliberate and agree on areas where they find it feasible to collaborate and also on areas where they need to operate their separate agendas.

1) Possible Areas for Collaboration:

The SCA has often likened the relationship between Federalists and Independentists to two buses that leave Yaoundé and are going towards the direction of Buea. The independence bus wants to continue the journey right through to Buea while the federation bus wants to end in Douala or Bekoko Junction or the Mungo bridge (depending on the type of federation, two-states, ten-states, etc).

In the course of that journey, the drivers and passengers of both buses have more to gain than lose during the common trajectory that they share (Yaounde-Douala/Bekoko, for example). For example, helping the other bus driver if he/she has a flat tyre and their car jack is found to be defective, etc.

On the contrary, if they spend time antagonising each other, they may never even get to Boumnyebel, talk less of Edea. In other words, they may never even cover a fraction of their respective journeys.

On a more pragmatic note, the following could be cited as possible areas for collaboration:

- ✓ **Advocacy:** Advocating together for the release of not only Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe and the Prisoners of Conscience (POCs) in Kondengui Prison but also for the release of persons of North West and South West origin who are locked up in various prisons across the country (notably Buea, Bamenda, Bafoussam, Douala, Yaounde) within the framework of the so-called 'Anglophone Crises'. Many of these prisoners, it has been found, were not

necessarily independentists of federalists but rather neutral members of the civil society. From this perspective, the presence of the Civil Society Caucus becomes very pertinent.

- ✓ **Diplomacy:** Diplomatic outreach involving joint delegations of two or three caucuses have the potential to be more impactful than a diplomatic outreach representing a single ideology. The caucus initiative is likely to be perceived as representing a wider cross section of the former BSC society.
- ✓ **Safety and Security on the Ground:** the caucuses could make and pursue joint statements with respect to the security and humanitarian situation on the ground in the NW and SW regions, such as alleged summary executions and other human rights abuses (rape, kidnapping for ransom, etc.) by both government soldiers and separatist forces. The caucuses would be in a good position to lobby foreign governments and international bodies for targeted or broad-based sanctions against parties that are not respecting the Geneva Convention in the conduct of the current conflict (be it the state party or the separatist groups).
- ✓ **Humanitarian role:** Through the Civil Society caucus, the Caucuses could lobby and have a more positive thumbprint on the ground which could go a long way to help alleviate the suffering on the ground in the SW and NW regions.

2) Areas Where Collaboration Could be More Daunting:

- ✓ **Elections in Cameroon:** The Federalists welcome elections in Cameroon but want guarantees that elections will be free and fair. In the upcoming October 2025 Presidential elections, the federalists want their followers to back candidates who take commitments to resolve the so-called Anglophone crisis via the institution of a federal system in Cameroon.

The CCFGA, the main federalist group in the Caucuses, has made it clear that they do not seek anything beyond federation as a solution to the self-determination quest of the former BSC. On the one hand, the Federalists are likely to face an uphill task to convince the independentists in the Caucus (SCA, SCPC, etc.) as to why pro-independence groups should endorse the idea of elections being held in the former BSC (SW and NW regions). An even tougher challenge would be to convince separatist groups that are not in the caucuses but with boots on the ground to allow such elections to take place.

A third challenge for the federalists will be to get political parties who stand for federation to make a written commitment in that regard, in exchange for their votes. In the absence of any such guarantees, and also the means to implement the guarantees, any such promise made by a political party may just be a promise written on sand.

- ✓ **Finance & Resource Mobilisation:** So far, the SCA and its allied pro-independence groups have almost largely been the sponsors of the activities of the caucuses. To be taken more seriously, the federalists will need to dip deep (or deeper) into their pockets or canvass

for financial support from persons, institutions or, indeed, any stakeholders who are keen to see the conflict permanently resolved.

- ✓ ***Diplomacy and Advocacy:*** During the Swiss talks some years ago and some other outings, the Cameroon government was quoted to have rebuked the fact that there were too many groups representing diverse ideologies and the government was not sure who to speak to. As the groups now converge under the banner of the Caucuses, this certainly provides a narrower spectrum for the Government's good faith to be put to test. On the international scene, the Caucuses stand a good chance of leaving a positive imprint, if they continue to be serious with the initiative as they have proven so far.

The daunting aspect might be how to finally reconcile these different ideologies and come up with one solution that fits all. It is the opinion of this writer that an ultimate solution that would be fair, unbiased and cut across the spectrum would be a United Nations (UN) supervised referendum in the territory of the former BSC. To cut across the various ideologies, the phrasing of the question shall have to include the choice of outright independence or reintegration with Cameroon on grounds of Federalism. Initially, it might seem daunting for the caucuses to agree on this but it is hard to imagine how any meaningful and long-lasting solution could be arrived at without presenting the referendum question as a request to the United Nations, in particular, and the international community as a whole. This will be especially valid if the political parties at the upcoming elections are unable to present the federalists with guarantees for a federation, the type of federation and how and within what time frame it will be implemented.

It is also questionable how, in due course, the Cameroon government will perceive the idea of a referendum if or when it gets to that, as that might be like shooting herself in the foot. The government maintains that the Special Status resolves the problem in the conflict zones. However, as the fighting and killings persist, even if less publicised, it is hard to objectively see an end to this conflict without more robust measures and concessions than a special status.

Some critics say that the government might be willing to make far-reaching concessions so as to provide a more durable and lasting solution but her hands are tied due to the overbearing influence of France in affairs that concern the state of Cameroon. If this is true as it is logical, when one looks at the influence of FrancAfrique in other Francophone countries, then it is probably more than high time for France to have a re-think, especially looking at what has been happening in other former French colonies (like the Sahel nations) during the past years.

More so, the ongoing Monday lockdowns in the conflict regions, the reliance on IMF loans in recent years, and other pointers do not provide good leverage for a continuing conflict in a nation like Cameroon. Ultimately, if intransigence persists, it's eventually going to be one party defeating their adversary or the UN stepping in to impose a referendum, and the latter

is not likely to happen if either party to the conflict does not officially ask the UN for such a referendum.

In spite of whatever challenges there might be, the Caucuses initiative remains a worthwhile venture, especially with the inclusion of the Civil Society, and should be given the chance by all stakeholders who seek a meaningful resolution to the conflict in the NW and SW regions (former BSC), on the platform of truth, justice, peace and security.