Cameroon:
Façade of Autonomy?
The Special Status as A Solution to The Anglophone Crisis

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Abstract: The legacy of colonialism in Africa, characterized by artificial boundary imposition, has resulted in engrained conflicts rooted in ethnic and cultural divisions. The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon illustrates this enduring socio-political unrest, with the North-West and South-West regions demanding greater autonomy and recognition of their socio-cultural, linguistic, and legal identity. In response, the Cameroonian government granted special status to these regions in the 2019 decentralization law, promising greater self-governance. This study critically gauges the effectiveness of this special status in responding to Anglophone demands through the lens of autonomy and conflict resolution theories. It explores whether this measure genuinely empowers these regions or merely represents a façade of autonomy. Employing qualitative methods, the research includes textual analysis, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with government officials, Anglophone leaders, and civil society. The findings reveal that despite hastily granting the special status, its implementation has been ineffective in addressing the grievances of the Anglophone regions. Consequently, the special status has remained a façade of autonomy because of excessive state control over regional institutions and a lack of political will to effectively devolve powers and resources. This paper emphasizes the need for inclusive strategies to address protracted conflicts and advances the discourse on sustainable autonomy solutions in subnational conflicts.

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Introduction

The tendency for conflict in post-colonial African states and regions often transcends the divisions established during colonial rule. Tensions frequently emerge along linguistic and colonial lines, affecting Anglophone, Arabophone, Francophone, and Lusophone nations (Araoye, 2012). Cameroon with about 250 ethnic groups, 270 national languages, and diverse cultural heritage (Aime, 2020), has grappled with the Anglophone crisis since 2016 which further escalated into an armed conflict. The crisis stems from the French-speaking majority government's perceived marginalization of the country's English-speaking North-West and South-West regions, commonly known as the Anglophone problem (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Bang & Balgah, 2022; Atom, 2023). Ngoh (2019) defines the Anglophone problem as:

> "*a minority problem; linguistic/language (Anglo-Saxon culture and values) minority as against linguistic/language (Gaullic culture and values) majority ... The problem is/was a "clash" between the majority Gaullic (French) culture and values and the minority Anglo-Saxon (British/English) culture and values"* (p. 382).

Fanso (2017) contends that it is the political, socio-economic, and linguistic relegation of Anglophones and their consideration as second-class Cameroonians. Anglophone Cameroonians refer to those who, originate from the English-speaking regions of Cameroon (North West and South West regions), formerly the British Southern Cameroon, constituting about 20% of the Cameroon population. This population asserts its identity based on colonialism-induced political, economic, social, and cultural features (Ngam & Budi, 2021). Ndi (2013) holds that historical indicators in the North West and South West have established a nearly inseparable bond between the Anglophones in Cameroon.

The Anglophone population has nurtured a sustained feeling that their linguistic and cultural identity is not sufficiently represented in the socio-political institutions of Cameroon, resulting in mounting resentment and requests for broader autonomy or even secession (Bang & Balgah, 2022). To respond to the Anglophone crisis, the Cameroonian government integrated into the 2019 decentralization law (hereafter referred to as 2019 law), a special status for the Anglophone regions (Crisis Group, 2023). This legislative innovation intended to endow the Anglophone regions with greater autonomy and policy-making authority within the context of a unitary state in Cameroon. However, the features of this special status and its potential impact on the Anglophone crisis remain a theme of enduring discussion and research. Autonomy is a form of territorial self-rule in which a special status is granted to a territorially defined entity, accompanied by broader powers than other territorial regions of the same state (Wolf, 2013). According to Wolf and Weller

(2005), such autonomy to a specific region does not alter the state's institutional structure. Contrary to the view that autonomy intervenes as an interim step towards absolute self-governance, this research examines autonomy arrangements that safeguard national unity and excludes options for separation and independence.

This paper aims to critically scrutinize the special status mechanism and its implications for the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. Specifically, the study seeks to respond to the following research question: How does the special status of the Anglophone regions of Cameroon signify a frank effort to address the Anglophone crisis? Or is it purely a façade of autonomy that fails to tackle the fundamental issues? This research draws on existing scholarly outputs on the Anglophone crisis and empirical data collected through interviews and textual analysis, to offer a holistic understanding of the special status mechanism and its possible impact on the Anglophone population.

The available literature on Cameroon's Anglophone crisis affords a dense underpinning for this study. Researchers have broadly written on the historical and political features contributing to the marginalization of the Anglophone regions (Keke, 2020; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Shulika & Tella, 2022) including socio-cultural marginalization and dominance by the francophone-led government (Agwanda & Asal, 2021; Caxton, 2017), ethnonationalism (Fonchingong, 2013), and economic marginalization of natural resources rich Anglophone regions (Wanie & Tanyi 2013; Pommerolle & Heungoup, 2017). Other scholars have focused on the eminent disaster emergency of the crisis (Bang & Balgah, 2022).

These studies have emphasized the long-lasting protests of the Anglophone population, including the perceived disparity in resource distribution, the supremacy of the French language in the public sphere and education, and the insufficient representation in policy-making processes. Moreover, scholars have investigated the numerous efforts by the Cameroonian government to address the Anglophone crisis, including the application of decentralization strategies and the establishment of regional councils (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Crisis Group, 2023). However, these solutions have witnessed criticisms for their narrow scope and inability to respond to the essential desires of the Anglophone population, such as greater autonomy or federalism.

This study aims to contribute to scholarly discourse by concentrating on the special status governance mechanism and its potential to tackle the Anglophone crisis. It is imperative to note that the special status is a comparatively novel development in Cameroon, and its implications have not been investigated. This paper critically analyses the special status, unveiling its main features, the rationale for its enactment and application, and the possible obstacles and limitations it has encountered in addressing the Anglophone crisis. The paper adopts a qualitative research method, drawing on primary and secondary data sources.

The results of this paper contribute to painting a better picture of the Anglophone crisis and the likelihood of the special status in addressing it. The research also discloses the extent to which the special status embodies a genuine attempt to provide the Anglophone

regions greater autonomy or whether it is merely a façade that is ineffective in responding to the underlying problems. Furthermore, the research provides an understanding of the weaknesses and limitations of the special status to address the Anglophone crisis and its implications for autonomy arrangements and conflict resolution.

This paper examines the theoretical framework and empirical studies on autonomy arrangements in conflict resolution. Then it outlines the methodology that guided the study, and later presents the findings, focusing on an overview of the special status policy adopted in Cameroon and an assessment of its implementation. The findings result in discussions, evaluating the effectiveness of the special status in addressing the Anglophone crisis. This leads to drawing conclusions and recommending the way forward to fill the gaps of the autonomy policy while emphasizing its implications for policymakers and future cases of autonomy arrangements.

Theoretical framework

The study proceeds from the lens of the autonomy and conflict resolution theories. Autonomy theory contends that minority or regional groups should possess the right to self-governance, control of socio-political affairs, and acknowledge their distinct identity (Lapidoth & Lapidoth, 1997). This theoretical view highlights the significance of transferring power and resources to enhance local policy-making and preserve ethnic and linguistic plurality (Ghai, 2000). Conflict resolution theory on the other hand advocates for understanding the primary roots of conflicts and designing approaches to resolve them, such as power-sharing, decentralization, and wide-ranging peacebuilding processes (Ramsbotham et al., 2016). This theory pinpoints the need for establishing relationships and responding to the fundamental causes of conflicts to attain sustainable conflict transformation (Lederach, 1997).

The notion of autonomy is essential to understanding the Anglophone population's aspirations in Cameroon as it unswervingly focuses on the main issue of the Anglophone population's demand for greater autonomy within Cameroon. The theory has been effectively tested in some case studies to analyze the transfer of power and the success of autonomy arrangements. For instance, Wolff (2013) applied this theoretical framework to study the implementation of autonomy in South Tyrol, Italy, and discovered that a well-designed autonomy framework results in actual power-sharing and conflict resolution. Similarly, Ghai (2000) also adopted the theory to investigate the experiment of self-government in countries like South Africa, Ethiopia, Spain, India, and China, stressing the role of genuine decentralization and acknowledgment of minority rights.

In this study, autonomy theory is employed to critically appraise the extent to which the special status adopted for the Anglophone regions in Cameroon effectively empowers them and complies with the principles of local decision-making, management of political and cultural affairs, and acknowledgment of ethnic and linguistic identity. This theoretical

perspective facilitates assessing the gap between the Anglophone community's demands for self-rule and the realities of the special status application, eventually highlighting whether the special status constitutes a genuine devolution of power or merely a façade of autonomy.

Equally, considering the prolonged and intricate nature of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, conflict resolution theory offers an appropriate investigative framework. This theory has been successfully used in various contexts to study the success of conflict management and transformation initiatives. For instance, Lederach (1997) applied this theory to research the dynamics of conflict resolution in societies with entrenched divisions, underpinning the essence of establishing relationships and tackling the key causes of conflicts. Similarly, Kaldor (2013) used conflict resolution theory to assess the role of international interventions in addressing conflicts, highlighting the necessity for locally-driven and context-specific remedies.

The conflict resolution theory is adopted in this paper to assess the special status tool as a conflict management and resolution strategy in Cameroon. This theoretical lens sheds light on the political dynamics between the government and the Anglophone regions in implementing the special status, and its potential to address the main sources of the Anglophone conflict and establish pathways for durable conflict transformation.

Background to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon

The crisis plaguing the Anglophone regions in Cameroon is rooted in the country's colonial legacy and the intricate political dynamics that have occurred since its independence (Keke, 2020; Ngoh, 2019). To paint a clear picture of the issues surrounding the special status as a solution requires exploring the historical background of this enduring conflict. Cameroon experienced German imperial rule from 1884, but after World War I, the territory was disproportionately partitioned and administered by France and the United Kingdom as League of Nations mandates from 1916 to 1939 and later as trust territories of the UN after World War II (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Awasom, 2020). The French-governed territory became known as East Cameroon, while the British part became known as West Cameroon. This division established distinct linguistic and cultural identities for the two parts of Cameroon which would subsequently become a source of tension and conflict (Ngoh, 2019).

The French-administered territory of Cameroon attained independence on 1 January 1960, while the British-administered Southern Cameroons through an UN-supervised plebiscite on 11 February 1961, opted to reunite with the already independent East Cameroon, founding the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Awasom, 2020). This federation was proposed to establish a balance of power between the Anglophone and Francophone regions but was accompanied by challenges. According to Konings & Nyamnjoh (2003), the federal system of Cameroon progressively transformed into a more centralized, unitary

state. This shift was motivated by the policies of Ahmadou Ahidjo, the country's pioneer president Ahmadou Ahidjo who sought to consolidate power and foster national unity. Many Anglophones viewed the 1972 referendum—eradicating the federal system and introducing a unitary state—as a breach of the initial reunification arrangement (Awasom, 2020; Takougang, 2003).

The passage to a unitary state intensified the Anglophone population's grievances, as they perceived more centralization and an erosion of autonomy and representation within Cameroon's political system (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Song, 2015). Anglophone Cameroonians started feeling marginalized, with fears over the extinction of their linguistic, cultural, and legal identities. This bitterness ultimately resulted in the rise of Anglophone separatist movements, such as the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) in 1995 (Agwanda & Asal, 2022; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Takougang, 2019). This group and subsequent movements[1] promoted the secession of the Anglophone regions, known as Southern Cameroons or Ambazonia, from the rest of Cameroon (Pommerolle & Heungoup, 2017).

The Anglophone crisis gained momentum in 2016 after non-violent protests by Anglophone lawyers and teacher syndicates were responded to with a violent crackdown by the Cameroonian government (Agwanda & Asal, 2021). This triggered a cycle of demonstrations, government suppression, and the radicalization of Anglophone separatist movements, resulting in an armed conflict between the Cameroonian defense forces and Anglophone pro-separatist groups. The conflict has subsequently deteriorated, leading to systematic human rights abuses, the involuntary displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, and thousands of casualties (Crisis Group, 2019). The Cameroonian government's response through military repression has received criticism for further alienating the Anglophone population and fueling the secession sentiment (Agwanda & Asal, 2021).

Cameroon legislated the 2019 law, in which a special status was granted to the Anglophone regions in addressing the crisis (Crisis Group, 2023). The special status was intended to provide the Anglophone regions substantial autonomy and self-rule based on historical, legal, and cultural specifics while preserving their incorporation within the Cameroonian decentralized unitary state. However, this policy has been accepted with mixed feelings. Some Anglophone leaders have articulated incredulity, contending that the content of the special status does not adequately address the demands of the Anglophones for greater autonomy or even secession (Crisis Group, 2023). Meanwhile, others have cautiously

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1 See the following statistics of armed groups in 2017 by Agwanda & Asal (2021) Ambazonia Defence Force with approximately 300–500 fighters; Southern Cameroon Defence Forces (SOCADEF) with approximately 400 militiamen; Red Dragons (approx. 400 militants); Seven Karta (approx. 200 fighters); Swords of Ambazonia and Ambaland Quifor (approx. 400 fighters); Ambazonia Restoration Army (few dozen fighters); and the Vipers (few dozen fighters).

hailed the governance strategy, considering it an appropriate measure, but have highlighted the necessity for inclusive participation and genuine policy enforcement.

Literature review

Special status measures, often considered autonomy, self-governance, or devolution of power have been applied in many countries in responding to the demands of distinct ethnic, linguistic, or regional minority groups within a larger political entity. These arrangements aim to address the grievances and aspirations of distinct ethnic or regional groups; provide some degree of self-rule and policy-making in some key policy spheres; preserve the linguistic, cultural, and historical features of the beneficiary group; maintain the unity and territorial integrity of the main state; and avert or address violent conflict and separatist tendencies (Coakley, 2012; Wolf, 2013; Sahadžić, 2023). While the specific foundations and mechanisms of special status vary in various contexts, the primary goal, which aligns with this study's position is often to achieve national unity and regional self-determination.

Autonomy has emerged as a popular policy option among decision-makers seeking to resolve ethnonational conflicts (Fujikawa, 2021). According to Caspersen (2017), the ideal approach within the international community entails achieving self-determination through various forms of autonomy. This autonomy-inclined shift as a conflict resolution mechanism gained traction in the post-Cold War, having hitherto been perceived with a degree of uncertainty (Wolff & Weller, 2005).

Proponents of the autonomy approach argue that it allows subnational entities to achieve their desires of self-governance over their territories, without the national government having to forfeit its sovereignty (Caspersen, 2017; Kymlicka, 2015). This, in turn, provides guarantees to minority populations who may otherwise fear that the central authorities would undermine their security and continuous existence (Rothchild & Hartzell, 1999). In contrast, opponents contend that the devolution of territorial self-rule reinforces the group identity and the administrative capacities of subnational entities. This, they argue, enables the mobilization of people along identity lines, which can subsequently result in sensitive demands for separation (Cornell, 2002). Triggered by these contrasting views, Cederman *et al*. (2015) sought to examine the circumstances under which territorial self-governance is likely to avert self-determination conflicts. Their findings suggest that in the aftermath of conflict, autonomy deals should be accompanied by genuine integration of the minority group in the national government's executive to moderate the peril of renewed hostilities and mitigate future separatist tendencies.

An analysis of the literature on conflicts with separatist tendencies has highlighted some reasons for the failure of autonomy solutions to subnational conflicts. First, there exists an inconsistency between the degree of concessions states are willing to make and the aspirations of minority groups demanding autonomy. States are generally unwilling to grant substantial concessions to secessionist groups perceived to be militarily frail, even though these insurrections tend to be difficult to defeat and become protracted (Buhaug *et al*., 2009).

Some states opt to contain these conflicts rather than undertake substantive dialogue or war, as insurgence in remote areas does not threaten their political survival (Mukherjee, 2014). This lack of motivation to grant significant franchises is exacerbated in multiethnic states due to concerns that granting concessions to one party could set a precedent for demands from other groups (Walter, 2009; Fujikawa, 2017; Sambanis *et al*., 2018). Consequently, separatists demand substantial concessions, including independence, especially when they have been constantly sidelined and marginalized by the central government (Toft, 2006; Wucherpfennig *et al*., 2012). This results in a deadlock without a commonly acceptable response for both parties as opposed to continuous conflict (Fearon, 1995).

Second, even when the protagonists agree to a negotiated autonomy arrangement, the rebel group fears that the state may later violate the agreement. This commitment problem, where the government may be motivated to revoke the autonomy concessions once in a stronger position, prevents rebels from signing peace deals (Fearon, 1995; Lake & Rothchild, 2005). Addressing these two challenges of a lack of bargaining range and the commitment problem is essential for successful conflict resolution through autonomy arrangements.

Scholars seeking solutions to the commitment problem in conflict resolution above have proposed power-sharing deals and third-party safeguards (Walter, 2002). Power-sharing agreements enable warring parties to hold some degree of political power to defend themselves, meanwhile, mere autonomy deals may not be sufficient for subnational rebel groups, as they could be singly withdrawn by the state (Lake & Rothchild, 2005). To be effective, autonomy should be granted along with meaningful participation of the minority in the government (Cederman *et al*., 2015). However, this is unlikely feasible since the rebel groups are usually peripheral.

The solution of third-party guarantees—in the form of mediators, guarantors, or observers—has received significant scholarly interest in ensuring autonomy or future referendums in the long term in conflict resolution (Caspersen, 2017; da Rocha, 2019). Caspersen (2017) applauds the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland as an innovative approach to guaranteeing autonomy. Wolff (2011) on the other hand suggests that signing a bilateral or multilateral agreement to secure the deal could be suitable and effective. Such agreements between Finland and Sweden effectively guaranteed the autonomy of the Aland Island, likewise, the autonomy status of Hong Kong was safeguarded through the Sino-British declaration. Zartman (2000) postulates that rebel groups' fear of breach of commitment can be quenched if they are assured that the autonomy granted them is internationally safeguarded. To be more credible, such guarantors should be reputable and powerful states, or international organizations with the means to deter the state from backing out of its obligations for autonomy. The exact form of the guarantee, whether a formal treaty or other arrangement, is less important than the perception and conviction of the rebels that their autonomy is internationally protected.

The reviewed scholarly publications contend that autonomy arrangements are often implemented in response to the demands of distinct ethnic, linguistic, or regional groups within a larger political entity. These demands are typically rooted in a perceived sense

of marginalization, inadequate political representation, and the ambition for greater autonomy and self-governance (Kymlicka, 2015; Muro & Vlaskamp, 2016). In some cases, the state's recognition of the beneficiary population's cultural, linguistic, or historical specificities is crucial in establishing special status arrangements (Wolff, 2013).

The studies also indicate that special status strategies can take various forms and involve different tools for devolving power and policy-making. These mechanisms may include asymmetric federalism, in which the target region is granted a greater degree of autonomy than other subnational units, as in India, Ethiopia the case of Quebec in Canada, Aceh in Indonesia and Sardinia in Italy (Brown, 2005; Fessha & Bezabih, 2019; Stepan, 1999; Sahadžić, 2023; Tillin, 2017). Another form of autonomy identified entails the wide-ranging decentralization of administrative and law-making powers at the regional level (Wolff, 2013). Moreover, autonomy involves establishing regional legislatures, governments, and institutions with varying degrees of authority (Muro & Vlaskamp, 2016); the acknowledgment of the target region's unique linguistic, cultural, and legal features, and provisions for the devolution of resources and the running of certain domains, like education, healthcare, or natural resources (Coakley, 2012).

The literature reviewed paints a panoramic portrait vis-à-vis the outcomes and challenges of special status policies. On the one hand, several studies have emphasized the potential advantages of these mechanisms in responding to the grievances of specific regional or ethnic groups, mitigating the menace of violent conflict, and conserving cultural and linguistic pluralism (Coakley, 2012: Sahadžić, 2023). In some contexts, autonomy arrangements have fostered political stability, economic growth, and enhanced intergroup cohesion (Kymlicka, 2015).

Nevertheless, scholars also highlight some challenges and limitations of autonomy governance strategies. Muro & Vlaskamp (2016) point out ongoing strains and conflicts between the state and the beneficiary region over the scope and application of the special status. Some scholars raise fears of possible attrition of national unity and possible secessionist tendencies (Toft, 2006; Wucherpfennig *et al*., 2012). Autonomy policies also encounter uneven allocation of resources and authority challenges between the state and the target region, resulting in inequalities. This adds to the challenge of matching the demands for self-rule with the requirement for national coordination and integration (Coakley, 2012). Kymlicka (2015) identifies the issue of resistance from other subnational territorial entities or minority groups within the beneficiary region, who may feel sidelined or marginalized by the special status implementation. These setbacks emphasize the underlying complications and compromises in designing and implementing special status policies, stressing the need for cautious negotiation, trade-offs, and constant monitoring and fine-tuning (Wolff, 2013).

As the Cameroonian government and the Anglophone community continue to explore the special status proposal, the insights from this systematic review can provide a valuable reference point for understanding the complexities and trade-offs involved in such

arrangements, and the factors that may contribute to their success or failure. Ultimately, the design and implementation of special status arrangements must be tailored to the unique context of Cameroon, while drawing upon the lessons and experiences from other parts of the world.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative research design to critically investigate special status as a political solution to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. Qualitative methods facilitate the exploration of the aspirations, perspectives, and experiences of the various actors in the Anglophone crisis and the application of the special status (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Such in-depth understanding is essential for examining the factors shaping the effectiveness of the special status in addressing the Anglophone population's demands.

The study conducted a thorough textual review of the Anglophone crisis and its special status, including government policies, legal documents, and scholarly publications to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Anglophone revendications, the government solution, and the academic discourse on the subject matter (Bowen, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders and participants including identified Anglophone community leaders, government officials, and civil society, allowing for open-ended discussions to gather diverse perspectives (Legard *et al.*, 2003). The study also collected data through focus group discussions with members of the Anglophone community, to enable a deeper consideration of the experiences, insights, and aspirations of the Anglophone regions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The discussions permitted the participants to disclose their opinions on the special status and its potential to respond to their core demands and protests.

The gathered data was assessed through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This entailed identifying recurrent themes, patterns, and differing perspectives arising from the data. This aimed to critically assess how the special status has addressed the Anglophone crisis and the fundamental political and structural challenges that undermine its effectiveness. The study observed strict ethical decorum to safeguard participants' rights and well-being (American Psychological Association, 2017), by procuring informed consent, guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, and offering participants the choice to withdraw from the research at any time.

Overview of the Special Status Policy

As the Anglophone crisis erupted in 2016, one of the key demands was not effective decentralization as enshrined in the 1996 constitution, but rather a return to the pre-1972 federal system or secession from Cameroon. As the crisis persisted, President Paul Biya in 2019 promised to respond to the roots of frustration endured by the North West

and South West populations by expediting the decentralization process. The 2019 Major National Dialogue organized in Yaounde recommended the application of Article 62(2)[2] Of the 1996 constitution for the two Anglophone regions due to their specificities. Based on this constitutional provision, the government designed a special status in the 2019 law on the general code of Regional and Local Authorities. This section presents the legal and institutional foundations of the special status for the Anglophone regions, the perspectives of stakeholders on the governance mechanism, and the political impact of the policy from the lens of autonomy and conflict resolution theories and based on textual analysis and data from key informant interviews.

The legal foundations of the Special Status in Cameroon's Anglophone regions

The special status arrangement in Cameroon is rooted in Article 62(2) of the 1996 Cameroon constitution. This arrangement aimed to respond to the prolonged grievances of the Anglophone regions by creating a formal mechanism for governance and autonomy. The 2019 law in its Section 3 grants the North West and South West regions of Cameroon a special status. This status which distinguishes the two regions from the other 8 in Cameroon operates within decentralization and is visible in the unique organization and functioning of the two regions. The 2019 law defines a region as a "local authority composed of several divisions ... covers same territorial boundaries of the region which is an administrative unit" (Section 259(1)). The law emphasizes respect for the unique Anglophone educational system and the common law legal system in the two regions. In its section 327(2), the 2019 law further underscores that the special autonomy arrangement bestows on the two Anglophone regions a distinct organizational and functional regime, that aligns with their historical, cultural, and social values while acknowledging "the primacy of the state and national unity and solidarity."

The fundamental features of the special status legislated in favor of the Anglophone regions of Cameroon are elaborated in section 328 of the 2019 law. Apart from benefitting from the prerogatives devolved to the other 8 Cameroon regions, the North West and South West regions due to their autonomy status exercise special powers to: participate in the design of "national public policies relating to the Anglophone education sub-system." (2019 Law, Section 328(1)). The two regions are also empowered to establish and manage regional development entities and partake in defining traditional authorities' status. The 2019 law in section 328(2) also grants discretionary powers to the central government to consult the two special status regions on matters related to public administration of justice policies within the common law subsystem, and to integrate the Regions in "the management of public services established in their respective territories (2019 Law, section 328(3)).

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2 Without prejudice to the provisions of this Part, the law may take into consideration the specificities of certain Regions with regard to their organization and functioning.

Institutional Framework and implementation of the special status

The distinct institutional mechanisms of the Anglophone regions involve a bicameral Regional Assembly, the Regional Executive Council, and the Public Independent Conciliator (2019 Law, Sections 330 and 367(1)), as opposed to the other 8 Regions of Cameroon which have two organs, the Regional Council and the President of the Regional Council (2019 Law, Section 274). The Regional Assembly which is the deliberative organ is composed of the House of Divisional Representatives—made up of 70 Regional Councilors and five committees—and the House of Chiefs—constituted of 20 traditional authorities and two committees (2019 Law, Sections 332, 334, 336 & 338).

The Regional Executive Council is the managerial organ of the special status regions and comprises members elected through indirect universal suffrage from among Regional Councilors (Section 352(1)). It is headed by a President emanating from, and who presides over the House of Divisional Representatives (Section 359) and also the Regional Assembly (Section 344(1)), and a Vice President, a traditional ruler (Section 360(1)) who doubles as Chairperson of the House of Chiefs (Section 339). The Regional Executive Councils for the special status regions also comprise three Commissioners, each for economic development; health and social development; and educational, sports, and cultural development; two Secretaries, and one Questor (Section 352(2)).

The third institution for each special status region is the Public Independent Conciliator (Section 367), appointed by Presidential decree (Section 368), with ombudsman-like attributes for each Anglophone region. These personalities amicably resolve disputes between citizens and regional institutions, defend the rights of citizens, and submit recommendations to the President of the Republic on policies related to enhancing the special status. The established institutional mechanisms highlight a significant disconnection between the regional institutions, and the Councils found within the region. The only visible link operates between the Public Independent Conciliator and the Councils, wherein the former amicably resolves disputes between the latter and local public service users. The state ensures the supervisory authority through the appointed governor, over the region with excessive powers of control and sanction over regional institutions.

The expectations and outcomes of the Special Status

The initial expectations of Anglophone communities about the special status were that of full autonomy mostly in the form of a federation to address some of their grievances, including marginalization, low representation in government institutions and decision-making level, and the recognition of their historical, educational, cultural, linguistic, legal and political specificities. Interviews reveal that these expectations of significant change in the governance and control of resources in the two regions have not been achieved. The aspirations of improving public service delivery, significant political representation, and cultural recognition remain unmet. Faced with a contrary reality, the Majority of the

Anglophone population expressed disenchantment about insignificant development, emphasizing a pervasive feeling of betrayal. Consequently, the vacuum between the special status policy expectations and the ground realities has fostered frustration and violence in the regions.

Assessing the implementation of the special status

This section examines the impact of the special status policy on certain key indicators underscored by the autonomy theory, including decision-making and power-sharing, resource allocation and financial autonomy, the preservation of cultural and linguistic specificities, and stakeholder perceptions and lived experiences.

Decision-making and power-sharing

The theoretical background of the special status advocates for power-sharing to promote collaborative governance. However, the actual implementation has revealed the concentration of powers on the central government, with subnational governments feeling excluded in the primary policy-making process (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). The national government retains tight control over the administration of the special status regions. While the special status Regional Assemblies mimic the federal institutions that existed in the former West Cameroon before 1972, they tend to be weaker. The Francophone Governors in the two regions appointed by the Presidential decree possess veto prerogatives over the Regional Assemblies' decisions, including budgetary and expenditure approval, loan arrangements, and international cooperation agreements (2019 Law, Section 76(1)). The President of the Republic retains the powers to suspend or dismiss the President of the Regional Executive Council and dissolve the Regional Assembly (2019 Law, Section 314 & 315).

The omnipresence of the central government at every stage of the decision-making processes of the special status regions has resulted in some interviewed Regional Councilors seeing the appointed Governors as the actual decision-making authorities of the Regions. The Governors as of right participate in all Regional Assembly sessions, causing the Regional Councilors to avoid raising debatable issues relating to the Anglophone crisis for deliberations. As a result, the tasks of the Regional Assemblies have mostly revolved around routine administrative duties, sensitization campaigns, and supervision of projects in the regions (Crisis Group, 2023). Interviewed residents of the Anglophone Regions attest that the central government has retained decision-making powers and is unwilling to share powers with the Regional Assemblies, leaving the Assemblies to be puppets of the central government.

Resource allocation and financial autonomy

The theoretical underpinning of autonomy and conflict resolution contends that devolution of significant power, responsibility, and resources to subnational governments constitutes a remedy to conflict and fosters local governance. The 2019 law grants regional entities in Cameroon financial autonomy (Section 11). However, no legal frameworks have been adopted to empower regional bodies to enjoy fiscal autonomy. The 2019 law also establishes a Common Decentralization Fund to which the central government is expected to allocate a minimum of 15% of its annual revenue to the fund for regions and councils (Section 25). However, the central government has never allocated the total amount to decentralized entities. For instance, in 2022, the allocation was 7.2 percent of the annual budget and 8 percent in 2023, including 3 billion FCFA each for the 10 regions, the two special status regions inclusive.[3] The limited resource allocation and financial dependency significantly impact autonomy governance, resulting in a disempowerment feeling among regional authorities who often find themselves limited by bureaucratic feet-dragging and restrictions on their autonomy. These Central Government maneuvers substantially undermine the effectiveness of local governance, fostering a sense of neglect and abandonment by the Anglophone regions.

Cultural and Linguistic preservation efforts

To address the Anglophones' cultural and linguistic identity grievances, the central government created a National Commission on the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism in 2017.[4] This commission was mandated to promote bilingualism and multiculturalism in Cameroon, maintain peace, consolidate national unity, and strengthen the will and daily practice of living together. The rationale was that the commission would address the linguistic marginalization raised by the Anglophone population, however, interviews and focused group discussions revealed that since 2017, the commission has inadequately addressed the linguistic issues in particular and the Anglophone crisis in general. For instance, some judicial personnel interviewed deplored that in Courts of the North West and South West regions, judicial police authorities still write their reports in French and submit them to the courts, likewise the dominance of the French language in judicial processes before the military courts in the Anglophone regions.

Some part of the Anglophone population feels that the mechanisms adopted by the government to ensure the equality of English and French as official languages and integrate Anglophone values into the education system and public life remain shallow.

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3 Decree No. 2023/405 of 6 September 2023 setting the distribution of the General Decentralization Grant for the 2023 financial year.

4 Decree number 2017/013 of 23 January 2017, the President of the Republic of Cameroon created the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism.

Some Anglophones contend that these efforts do not respond to the entrenched systemic grievances like representation in policy-making and participation in national consultations and dialogues.

Stakeholder perceptions and lived experiences of the special status

Exploring stakeholder engagement and community integration discloses a deficit in the inclusive governance approach to the special status. While the government claims to have carried out consultations before establishing the special status at the Major National Dialogue, some members of the Anglophone communities and civil society hold that only the pro-government Anglophone elite was consulted who are insensitive to the grassroots realities of Anglophones, making the process politicized, top-down and with low-level stakeholder engagement. Also, the government prevented the holding of popular consultation of Anglophones before the Major National Dialogue and did not invite separatist leaders to the dialogue, making the special status a form of unilateral act of the government (Crisis Group, 2023). Moreover, the dialogue excluded debates on federalism and secession, and the special status was recommended during the Major National Dialogue without a consensus on its content. The government then proceeded two months later to legislate the content of the autonomy to suit her taste, leading to increased distrust of government unilateral policies by the Anglophone population.

Most Anglophone community members affirmed that they did not understand the special status and what it offers. Effective engagement is necessary for promoting local ownership, a bottom-up approach that ensures the policy responds to the community's needs. Also, many Anglophones argue that the special status institutions are mostly flooded with former senior pro-government officials or top ruling party militants who have been compensated for their loyalty to the regime rather than selected to address the grievances of the Anglophones. The government's approach to the special status exacerbates a disconnect from the political strategy, which is further worsened by enduring violence and instability, alienating the population from government efforts.

Discussions: Evaluating the effectiveness of the special status

The effectiveness of the special status in addressing the demands made by the Anglophones in 2016 is assessed from the lens of the autonomy and conflict resolution theories. This section interrogates how the special status policy has addressed the Anglophone population's fundamental grievances, mitigated the underlying causes of the Anglophone crisis, and promoted reconciliation and conflict transformation.

Addressing the key demands of the Anglophone population

The findings of this study reveal that the effectiveness of the special status in responding to the main aspirations of the Anglophone community remains debatable. The institutions for implementing the special status—Regional Assemblies, Regional Executive Council, Public Independent Conciliator—have been created and are functioning. To address the linguistic and cultural demands, the government created the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, with an Anglophone as Chairperson. In addressing the demands relating to the Common Law subsystem, the government created a Common Law Division at the Supreme Court, a Common Law section for the training of judicial personnel in Common Law at the National School of Administration and Magistracy (NSAM), redeployed Anglophone judicial and legal officers to replace some the Francophone personnel in the courts in Anglophone regions (Bang & Balgah, 2022).

While the rationale of this policy was to acknowledge and remedy the legacies of inequalities, many Anglophones highlighted the enduring sense of neglect and marginalization. The demand for autonomy for instance has not been addressed, as the central government retains significant control over Regional Assemblies' decisions, and the special status institutions are still substantially dependent on the central government for funding. Also, the 2019 Law makes the special status insecure, empowering the President of the Republic to dissolve the special status institutions. Also, instead of granting Regional Executive Councils supervisory powers over the councils in the regions, the 2019 Law places the councils under the control and supervision of central government-appointed representatives. This creates a coordination gap between the Region and the councils under it. Some institutions like the Public Independent Conciliator have received hundreds of complaints from local public service users but have not addressed them effectively as it only recommends solutions without constraining powers to enforce their decisions.

These shortcomings cause many Anglophones to consider that the special status has remained on paper and the grassroots population has not felt its impact. Also, the persistent domination of the French language in some public institutions in the Anglophone regions like the Military courts and National Gendarmerie, the absence of substantial economic development projects, the reluctance of the central government to devolve full powers and resources to the special status institutions, and consult these institutions on decisions on the regions makes the policy to be perceived as ineffective in addressing the key demands of the Anglophones.

Mitigating the underlying causes of the Anglophone crisis

The underlying drivers of the current Anglophone crisis included the dominance of the French language in schools and courts in Anglophone regions (Bang & Balgah, 2022), low representation in decision-making, marginalization, and perceived threats to the educational, legal, cultural, linguistic and sociopolitical identity of the Anglophone regions.

These grievances, also triggered by the centralist model of governance (Crisis Group, 2017) resulted in moderate calls for autonomy through federalism and extremist calls for secession (Crisis Group, 2019). Anglophones and civil society argue that the special status has mitigated the major causes of the crisis to a lesser extent. The persisting grievances highlight the central government's inability to respond to the situation adequately.

While most of the interviewed local population know little about the autonomy policy, those informed of the arrangement hold that it was received with mixed feelings. While the pro-government Anglophone elite contends that the policy has slowly addressed the triggers of the crisis, separatist armed groups received the policy with hostilities and outright rejection. As such, the visible lack of political will to address the situation, the persistence of high cost of living and hardship, violence, killings, and other human rights abuses daily supports the view that the special status has not mitigated the crisis. The lack of significant policy reform has enhanced persistent unrest in the two regions.

Promoting reconciliation and conflict transformation

The potential for the special autonomy arrangement to promote reconciliation and transform the conflict has been restricted by deep-rooted political dynamics and persistent violence. Although some strategies aim to promote dialogue, the prevailing context of mistrust undermines the strive to build consensus and social cohesion (Crisis Group, 2023). Anglophone voices highlight that as a top-down policy unilaterally imposed on Anglophones, it has not impacted the grassroots population. The conflict and ghost towns have continued, with high crimes, kidnappings for ransom, school shutdowns in some areas, and regular confrontations between government forces and separatist fighters. Anglophone crisis victims continue blaming the government for the conflict-related ordeals and the lack of genuine political will to invite the major stakeholders to an inclusive genuine dialogue table involving diverse community voices and chart a way to effectively address the crisis, achieving grassroots reconciliation and mechanism for conflict transformation and economic empowerment.

The findings of this study align with Mukherjee's (2014) argument, as the Cameroon government opted to use military means to suppress the protesters rather than dialogue with them, as the conflict is occurring in the periphery and not significantly affecting the seat of political institutions, Yaounde. The calls for secession by Anglophone separatist leaders also corroborate Toft (2006) and Wucherpfennig *et al*. (2012) positions that such extreme demands are made when the protesting minority has endured long-standing marginalization from the central government, resulting in deadlock solution perpetual conflict (Fearon, 1995).

The study results' implications are relevant for conflict resolution and autonomy theories. The arguments of these theories that adopting an autonomy governance policy can facilitate stability and foster peace are contested by the realities monitored in the Anglophone crisis,

where autonomy has been granted, but political instability and conflict perpetuate (Crisis Group, 2023; Keke, 2020). Also, while the autonomy theory has mostly been tested in contexts of ethnic minorities, this paper introduces a new perspective by applying the theory to autonomy arrangements addressing a conflict rooted in colonial heritage. The affected Anglophone communities have expressed the desire for a genuine and inclusive dialogue in the presence of third-party guarantees to secure the effective implementation of a possible autonomy deal. It becomes apparent that secessionist conflict resolution strategies do not end with granting autonomy. The calls by Anglophone separatist leaders for a dialogue in the presence of a third-party guarantor stems from what Lake and Rothschild (2003) referred to as the fear that the central government may later unilaterally violate the autonomy agreement.

Beyond legal recognition, there is a need for genuine political will and sustained commitment from the central government to enforce policies that respond to the underlying drivers of Anglophone grievances and empower the local population. Failure to transform legal autonomy into actual power and resource control escalates violence, emphasizing the need for a well-designed and nuanced governance approach. Policymakers must acknowledge that shallow efforts will not be appropriate. Only substantial engagement with the local population is crucial to boost trust and foster sustainable peace. The current experience of the special status arrangement as a solution to the Anglophone crisis emphasizes that in conflict resolution, autonomy void of genuine devolution of power and resources can result in further alienation and conflict.

Conclusion and the way forward

The above analysis reveals several significant findings relating to the special status of the Anglophone regions in Cameroon. Initially designed as a strategy to respond to historical grievances and foster governance, the special status has been unable to achieve the set goals. The legal frameworks designed to enhance the implementation of the autonomy policy and empower local governance have proven abstruse and inconsistently applied, resulting in a pervasive feeling of marginalization among the Anglophone population.

Notwithstanding the initial optimism in 2019 when the special status policy was legislated, the expectation that this legal acknowledgment would translate into significant policy reforms has not materialized. This has kept a majority of Anglophones, including those who initially supported the policy from the inception with a sense of frustration and increased marginalization. The research findings answer the research question in the affirmative, that the current special status for the Anglophone regions is a mere façade of autonomy, mostly strong on paper and void of devolved powers and resources to the autonomous regions. Despite the low support from Anglophones and the outright dismissal by separatist leaders, the special status has the potential to be a crucial avenue for fostering consensus during peace negotiations. It establishes a legal framework that acknowledges Anglophone identity and enhances regional autonomy within the decentralization context.

The complexities identified in this research analysis present the need for recommendations to address the lapses of the special status policy and for future policy frameworks and research initiatives. There is a need to promote genuine dialogue and strengthen local governance structures. Each reconciliation strategy must prioritize genuine engagement with the Anglophone population, including substantive consultations that recognize the opinions of all stakeholders, including marginalized groups and separatist leaders. Such dialogues will permit the stakeholders including separatist leaders to suggest how a more operational local governance arrangement would work. A compromise could be reached between the central government's total rejection of separation and the separatist's push for federalism.

Local governance mechanisms should also be reinforced with a participative approach to integrating the grassroots population in decision-making processes, linking the gap between policy and practice by empowering local authorities and facilitating their involvement in every governance stage. To ameliorate Anglophone identity and relations with the central government, the special status should be reformed to empower regional authorities, particularly in education, language, and judicial matters which constitute the core grievances. Regional assemblies should be empowered to recommend legislation in these crucial domains, permitting them to respond to longstanding grievances and contribute actively to policy-making. While the head of state may still need to promulgate new laws, this legislative initiative would enhance a greater sense of agency among Anglophones. The central government should guarantee adequate and sustained funding—15% of the national budget as mandated in the 2019 law—to regional institutions to achieve their expanded mandates. Accountability measures should accompany this financial transfer to ensure regional assemblies effectively manage the allocated resources.

The reviewed special status policy should include mechanisms that promote effective representation of Anglophone concerns. One of the key reforms should include provisions for joint sessions between the Regional Assemblies for the North West and South West regions, facilitating deliberations on shared matters like language, Anglo-Saxon education, and common law without central government approval. Additionally, adopting direct universal suffrage in regional assembly elections—as opposed to the current indirect suffrage—would increase the legitimacy of the institutions and the ownership feeling of voters. Expanding voting rights to individuals previously prohibited from voting could foster diverse perspectives and deter violent political expression. Furthermore, establishing a commissioner for marginalized groups like women within the regional executive would ensure their representation and address their specific needs, reinforcing their role in framing governance and post-conflict resolution. The authority of the Public Independent Conciliator should be expanded to include addressing disputes between national civil institutions and users.

Cameroon's 2019 Special Status granted to the North West and South West regions aimed to acknowledge Anglophone identity but has witnessed notable weaknesses and criticisms. The central government imposed it on the two Regions without significant

consultation with key Anglophone leaders and community resulting in regional assemblies with restricted law-making prerogatives and no formal collaboration framework. These indirectly elected figures fail to represent the local population effectively and often overlook significant educational, judicial, and linguistic issues that triggered the conflict. Given the ongoing conflict, reforming the special status could empower these assemblies and address Anglophone grievances, potentially enhancing trust and establishing a trajectory toward an inclusive political response between the government and separatists. These sustained initiatives would rectify the misalignment between policy goals and lived realities, resulting in a stable and inclusive governance. The Anglophone regions' experience represents a glaring indicator of the significance of understanding and responsiveness in governance. Acknowledging the voices of all communities in conflict context is not an issue of policy, but a fundamental rock for peace and democracy.

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