

# Dr Christopher Fomunyoh tears Biya regime to shreds!

*Dr Christopher Fomunyoh, Senior Associate for Africa and Regional Director at the Washington, DC-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, NDI, has torn the Biya regime to shreds, faulting it for several shortcomings in properly addressing issues concerning the country in general and the armed conflict rocking the North West and South West regions in particular.*

*In this exclusive interview with The Guardian Post's Kristian Ngah Christian, Solomon Tembang and Maxcel Fokwen, the Cameroonian-born international governance, human rights, development and democracy heavyweight, among others issues, faulted the government for using brute violence on Anglophones for expressing grievances which he described as legitimate and well-founded.*

*He also warned that time is running out for Cameroonians to discuss the form of state in order to resolve the crisis in the North West and South West regions, insisting that a third party mediation or facilitation to resolve the Anglophone crisis "is necessary and inescapable".*

*The interview is as compelling as it is revealing. Read on.*

**Thank you for accepting to talk to The Guardian Post.**

The pleasure is mine, and I appreciate the opportunity.



2017, government radicalised the movement, kindled revolt across the Anglophone community and ignited a series of confrontations that have led to the full-blown conflict that we now see in these regions. Today, thousands of people have been killed, hundreds of villages have been torched or burnt down, over 70,000 people are now refugees in neighbouring Nigeria as well as in countries in Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbeans and even North America, approximately 700,000 internally displaced persons now live in other regions of the country, over 800,000 children have not been able to attend school these four years, over 1.4 million people are now at risk of famine, and more could be impacted if the conflict continues. This is catastrophic beyond measure, and the killings and atrocities must stop.

**Government has taken a number of measures to bring an end to the conflict. Do you think these measures are enough to resolve the crisis?**

The reality on the ground is that the situation is worsening and deteriorating as hearts harden in distaste of what is happening, especially as the killings and atrocities are still ongoing. The reality on the ground is that, today, millions of people are in pain, there's suffering and anger in the land, people are traumatised and wondering whether justice and peace will ever return and when they'll regain normalcy in their lives. So in earnest, it doesn't matter what I think about the government's measures so far; it doesn't even matter what the government says about its measures. If the conflict persists despite the measures taken thus far, it means that the measures have been insufficient or inadequate. Therefore the government must redouble its efforts, and act more creatively to bring an end to this senseless fratricidal conflict.

**Some people are proposing a rotating Presidency between Anglophones and Francophones as a way out. What do you think?**

The ongoing conflict has reopened such deep

wounds that simple political positioning through elite bargains will not suffice to resolve it. The root causes are known to the leadership of Cameroon and to almost every man, woman and child in the North West and South West regions and must therefore be addressed in a very honest and sincere manner. Anglophones have not forgotten that what you suggest was the spirit and the letter of the constitution that existed from 1961- 1972; yet that did not stop the machinations that led to today's protocol in which an Anglophone is the 5th personality in the current line of succession. They have not forgotten that shortly before 1982 when Paul Biya came to power, the rules of succession were hastily changed to place him ahead of two Anglophones: the vice president of the state party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU), and erstwhile vice President of the Republic, John Ngu Foncha; and the previous second personality and then Speaker of the National Assembly, Solomon Tandeng Muna. Today, most Anglophones have lost faith and trust in promises from Yaounde and by people noted for never keeping their bond.

**"Cameroon's overall state of democracy scorings are worse now than they were three decades ago"**

**Can a change in the form of state be another possible solution to the crisis?**

That, for most people, would be the minimum; and I would say that the faster those types of issues are

**"Arresting & imprisoning lawyers & teachers after initiating dialogue with them was wrong"**

**The crisis in the North West and South West regions, which started as a sit-down strike by lawyers and teachers, has morphed into an armed conflict without any feasible solution in sight. What in your opinion has brought us to where we are?**

It is extremely sad to see what has happened to Cameroon in the past four years, especially to our people of the North West and South West regions or the people of the former Southern Cameroons. In 2016, I believe government underestimated the pent-up frustrations that Anglophones have felt about being marginalised and underrepresented in the affairs of state and distribution of national resources in a country they call theirs. Particularly, government's response to the initial protests by lawyers and teachers was inappropriate as it resorted to violence and the use of brute force against peaceful demonstrators and a people with legitimate and well-founded grievances. Arresting and imprisoning lawyers and teachers after initiating dialogue with them was wrong. I remember visiting Barrister Felix Nkongho Agbor Bala, Dr Fontem Neba, Mancho Bibixy and others in Kondengui prison and even sitting through one of the court hearings before the Military Tribunal in Yaounde, and wondering to myself what these fine gentlemen had done to warrant being court martialed and thrown in jail. Moreover, by killing peaceful protesters from these two regions on September 22,

tabled and discussed openly through negotiations or mediated talks, the better. I worry, seriously, that with each passing day, minds would be so hardened that even what looked attractive a few years ago may no longer be acceptable to a vast majority of people in these two regions.

***What in your opinion is hindering genuine and inclusive dialogue to resolve the crisis?***

The greatest difficulty we face as a country is that since 1961, Anglophones have lived through two systems of government and can tell which of the two is better, whereas those in power have never lived that experience and so have no frame of reference; worse still, they lack the humility to listen and learn. Many of them have a perverse view of leadership which they see as lording over citizens instead of humbly serving them. Today, world leaders and experts continue to state that the political grievances that are the root causes of this conflict cannot be resolved militarily, yet that message seems not to be understood by the powers that be in Yaounde.

***You are known to have raised the Anglophone crisis at different international fora. What explains the silence of the international community?***

No native of the North West and South West regions or descendants of former Southern Cameroons can sleep peacefully at night, given what is happening to our people. Even many leaders on the continent and elsewhere ask me in astonishment, ‘what is happening to your country? Why are people being killed in Anglophone Cameroon?’ And so I try to raise awareness on the conflict as much as I can because I believe

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that friends of Cameroon must help bring an end to this conflict. I have lost faith in Paul Biya’s capacity to singlehandedly bring justice and peace to the North West and South West regions. The international community has been vocal to some extent, but I also believe that even they are coming to the realisation that simple declarations no longer suffice, and that more concrete actions are needed to bring the conflict to an end.

***Why the insistence on mediation and negotiations when government officials and some religious leaders feel that Cameroonians can resolve this without outside mediators?***

In 2016, such a Cameroon-only conclave would have been meaningful, but four years later, after so much blood has been spilled and so much damage and destruction done, these leaders should understand that a third party mediation or facilitation is necessary and inescapable. After what happened to the lawyers and teachers whose only offense in 2016 was to have penned their grievances in nicely written prose to the appropriate authorities, do proponents of this Cameroon-only approach sincerely believe that, with all the pain, bitterness, anger and mistrust generated by the conflict so far, hypothetically, someone like a ‘Field Marshal’ will sit in the same room in Yaounde with the Minister of Defense or the governor of the South West region to discuss peace in Lebialem? Or

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that Ayuk Tabe, Ikome Sako, Cho Ayaba and others should come sit in Yaounde across the table from Ngoh Ngoh, Sadi Rene, Atanga Nji and others to sort out their differences over this crisis? I urge each and every one of them to rethink their stance. Lest we forget, many African countries faced similar conflicts in the past, and used external facilitation or mediation to bring all parties together and find a negotiated solution. For example, the Congolese spent months in South Africa under the mediation of now late former President Ket Masire of Botswana negotiating between the government in Kinshasa and armed rebel movements in Eastern Congo, culminating in the Sun City Accords that brought peace to their country. Also, during their armed conflict or civil war about 15 years ago, Ivorians took themselves to Burkina Faso with then President Blaise Compaore serving as mediator until they obtained ‘the ‘Ouagadougou Accords’ that brought peace to their country; and more recently, Malians used Algeria to assemble the various belligerents and the government of Bamako and negotiate peace through the ‘Algiers Accords’ which saved their country from total disintegration.

Why then can’t the government take similar bold steps to save lives? Leaders who love peace and justice for their people will go to any lengths to find both. Ours have still to demonstrate the zeal required for the urgency and enormity of the task at hand, and I’m afraid history will judge them very poorly.

***Will the expected change of leadership in the US wherein democrats are retaking the White House have any impact on the Anglophone crisis?***

I sure hope so, not just for the Anglophone crisis but for US-Africa relations. The previous administration had such a weird approach to Africa and Africans, one can only expect a Biden presidency to do better. At the same time, it is fair to note that even during the Trump Administration, considerable attention was paid to the crisis, given the multiple efforts by

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Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, and even the then US ambassador in Yaounde, Peter Ballerin.

At the end of the day though, as the saying goes, ‘you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.’

***Do you share the opinion that Cameroon’s problems are linked to Biya’s longevity in Power?***

You can’t be the oldest president in the world-soon turning 88- the second longest-serving with 38 years at the helm and not have that weigh negatively on a country facing multiple challenges.

In the case of the Anglophone conflict, Biya’s negative role is compounded by the fact that he knew about the grievances even while serving as Prime Minister and before becoming president. He then aggravated the situation through decisions of his own that include changing the country’s name in 1984 to revert to a an appellation that was used in 1960 when Southern Cameroons was not part of La Republique du Cameroun, and a national flag with only one star, and then stayed silent as many of his ministers and other surrogates inflamed the situation with excessive victimisation of Anglophones when the crisis broke in 2016.

I am extremely disappointed in his performance in office-and I say this as someone who celebrated his coming to power in 1982, in the streets of Douala at the time, and listened with admiration as he took the oath of office before the National Assembly in Yaounde responding in English “I do so swear.”

**“Each passing day, minds would be so hardened that even what looked attractive a few years ago may no longer be acceptable to a vast majority of Anglophones”**

***As an international election expert who has observed elections in Cameroon in the past, and given your keen interest in political developments in the country, what is your assessment of the upcoming regional elections?***

I have serious doubts that the regional elections will improve or save lives, especially in the North West and South West regions. These are indirect elections with a limited predetermined electorate, so I don’t think the population is aware or cares about its occurrence and outcome.

***Can you rate Cameroon’s democracy on a scale of 20?***

So much to fix; not sure where to start. Credible independent organisations such as Freedom House consider that Cameroon does not meet the definition of democracy and so I possibly couldn’t rate it on that scale. The country’s overall state of democracy scorings are worse now than they were three decades ago.

***How far have you gone with your ambition to be a presidential contender in Cameroon?***

These are extremely trying times for Cameroon, and especially for our people-a time for deep reflection and meditation; a time to shelf personal ambitions and figure out how to end this senseless conflict and get our people out of the horrible mess in which we currently find ourselves. Everything else pales in comparison, and it is on that that I’m fully focused right now.