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A Who's Who of Franck Biya's Inner Circle, President Biya's Son

By Jeune Afrique | March 30, 2021



Officially, Franck Biya, the son of Cameroon's President Paul Biya, has no political ambitions. Franck Biya has never run for political office and does not appear in

any official organisation chart. However, he regularly finds himself on the front page of Cameroonian newspapers, which tend to view him as a potential successor to his father, 88-year-old Paul Biya, who has served as Cameroon's president since 1982 and is the leader of the powerful Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC). 49-year-old Biya is nevertheless careful not to reveal any of his intentions. He is very discreet as he avoids the media and has never given an interview. Biya's entourage is also careful to deny any rumours about his political ambitions. A movement called the "Friends of Franck Biya" began in Cameroon and spread throughout the diaspora. What is its objective? To support the 2025 presidential candidacy of the eldest son of Paul and Jeanne Irene Biya (who died in July 1992). Some view it as a test run, as a means of gauging public opinion. Others see it as a means of exerting pressure on this businessman who has so far shown little interest in public affairs. Although he has always stayed out of the spotlight, Biya has not hesitated to use his influence with his father to promote members of his mother's family to prominent government positions. Robert Nkili, who served as minister of labour and transport between 2002 and 2015, is his mother's younger brother and Louis-Paul Motaze, the current finance minister, is his cousin. Both owe their positions to Biya. One of the reasons why Biya has remained under the radar for so long is that he left Cameroon in the 1990s to study in Los Angeles. He then moved to South Africa and France, where he lived until March 2020, when he returned to Cameroon just before the country's first Covid-19 lockdown.

Cameroon's Elusive Peace: Rivals, Rifts, and Secret Talks

By R. Maxwell Bone | March 29, 2021

Last April, a convoy of vehicles left the forbidding Kondengui Central Prison and drove the six kilometers to the National Episcopal Conference Center, a large, imposing building in the heart of Cameroon's capital, Yaounde. In one car was Sisiku Julius AyukTabe, serving a life sentence on charges of terrorism for leading an armed separatist movement that is demanding independence for Cameroon's two English-speaking regions. He was about to meet with government officials in secret talks to explore the possibility of a ceasefire in a four-year conflict that has now left close to 800,000 people homeless and upended the lives of three million people. President Paul Biya has consistently spurned contact with the separatists. Publicly, he has referred to them as "terrorists" or "murderers" who, he claims, do not represent the views of the people of the anglophone regions. But despite the public disavowal of dialogue, since 2019 both Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute and intelligence chief Maxime Eko Eko – part of a small pro-talks group within the government – have quietly reached out to separatist leaders. The meeting with AyukTabe and members of both men's teams was their most significant step so far. News of that meeting did not emerge until three months later, after a second meeting in July. When it did, it caused shock and anger among hardline members of the government and among some key members of the separatist movement, who are firmly opposed to direct negotiations with the government. The response revealed the difficulties in crafting an agreement to bring peace to the residents of Cameroon's anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions. Challenges include not only the need to bring the government and separatists to the negotiating table; there's also a lack of consensus within both groups over how the peace process should move forward – or, in the case of government hardliners, whether a peace deal is needed at all. International pressure has been building in recent months to try and find a solution – with Canada, France, the United States, and the Vatican all showing renewed interest. Civil society groups in the regions impacted by the conflict have frantically been signaling the urgency of ending the violence, pointing to the disruptions to civilian lives caused by the attacks on rural villages, schools and teachers, to kidnappings and the abuses against women. But all initiatives –

[Torrential Rains Break Up Major Roads, Disrupt Commerce Routes in Cameroon](#)

By Zenger News | March 29, 2021

Thousands of commuters on the Bamenda-Babadjou road network that links the Western and Northwestern regions of Cameroon were stranded for several hours last week after a section of the 35-kilometer (22-mile) dilapidated network collapsed following torrential rains. Construction to rehabilitate the road network began in 2017 after the country received financial assistance from the World Bank. But work stalled for months during the long-running armed conflict between government forces and separatist militants. “Work was advancing on the Babadjou-Bamenda stretch. But following attacks [by secessionist forces] on Jan. 8, 2021, the contractor notified us he couldn’t continue because of insecurity,” Public Works Minister Emmanuel Nganou Djoumessi told lawmakers during parliament’s March session, as members grilled the minister on why the road project had stalled. Some travelers heading to Bamenda, capital of the Northwest Region, from the major cities of Yaounde, Douala and Bafoussam were forced to trek before boarding various vehicles to reach their destinations. Those who could afford it hired motorbikes at exorbitant costs. The travelers who were leaving Bamenda had to wait for several hours until a section of the damaged road was partially repaired. “We have decided to carve the section of the road into four. We have already mobilized national [road construction] companies to carry on with the works,” Djoumessi said after visiting portions of the damage. “My appeal to fellow citizens situated in the work side is to organize themselves to protect the equipment and the technicians so that nothing should stop work. The commitment of President Paul Biya to construct this road is there,” he said. The road forms part of the 443-km corridor linking Bamenda and the Nigerian town of Enugu. The Northwest and Southwest regions are inhabited mostly by Anglophone Cameroonians, who often complain about perceived marginalization by French-dominated centralized Cameroon — ruled by 88-year-old, for-life President Paul Biya since 1982.



including an effort by a Swiss-based NGO – have been stymied and are now stalled. The search is on to find a way to break the deadlock. For AyukTabe, a former university administrator, talking to government officials was a political risk. He had been a popular and unifying leader at the launch of the separatist “Ambazonia” movement in 2017, but his detention in 2018 in neighbouring Nigeria and subsequent transfer to Cameroon created a leadership vacuum that others vied to fill. Months after the July 2020 meeting, speaking to TNH from his prison cell in Yaounde, AyukTabe said that on the drive to meet with staff from the prime minister’s office, he was still “trying to fathom” how a government that had “killed thousands of innocent Ambazonians now claims to be willing to discuss a ceasefire that they had previously said was not needed”. What swayed his decision to sit down with government representatives was his belief that something had to be done to end the violence and suffering. Should Yaounde prove insincere, “it will only underscore [their preference for conflict]”, he reasoned. The talks did seem to result in some progress. In the April meeting, AyukTabe and a small group of separatist leaders detained with him set tough pre-conditions for a ceasefire. In July, the government called the men in Kondengui back. Both sides appeared to reach a mutual understanding on all points, including the confinement of the security forces to their barracks; the release of all prisoners; and the acceptance of a third party mediator in future talks, AyukTabe told TNH days after the talks occurred. The meeting ended with handshakes, he recounted, and members of the government delegation took selfies with the separatists – who wore the few nice clothes they had with them in prison, with AyukTabe in traditional robes. But the optimism was short lived. When AyukTabe shared news of the meeting on social media, there was uproar from within the diaspora-based separatist ranks – and initial denials by an embarrassed government that there had been any talks at all. Chris Anu, a fiery Texas-based separatist spokesman, noted witheringly on the separatist’s digital broadcasting platforms that AyukTabe and the other detainees “don’t have the right, they don’t have the mandate, to discuss the future of Ambazonia while they remain in chains”. The negativity of the response to the July meeting caused confusion amongst fighters and civilians on the ground and among the diplomatic community over who has the loyalty of the fighters – and the authority to speak for the movement. The separatist cause is deeply split. There are, broadly, two rival “Interim Governments”: One is led by a US-based former pastor, Samuel Ikome Sako, who was selected to be the “acting interim president” of Ambazonia after AyukTabe’s detention. The other is still headed by AyukTabe, who has retained the respect of the majority of separatist fighters in anglophone Cameroon. Relations between both men were cordial at first. Sako and his group provided support to AyukTabe’s family, who are seeking asylum in the United States. Yet friction arose between the loyalists surrounding the two men, and the official split between the groups took place in the spring of 2019. Animosity between the two have only intensified since. President Biya, in power for close to four decades, has consistently shrugged off calls for dialogue. He is backed by a number of hardliners within his government. They include the powerful secretary general of the presidency, Ferdinand Ngoh Ngoh, who was blindsided by the talks last year, and Atanga Nji, the minister for territorial administration. He has refused to accept anglophone claims of marginalisation or to acknowledge the violence of the counter-insurgency operations – abuses that have added to the ranks of the separatists. The pro-talks wing is led by

Should Biya Worry About US President Biden's Africa Policy?

By Mathieu Olivier | March 23, 2021

Will new US President Joe Biden change the situation in Yaoundé? Opposition leader Maurice Kamto certainly hopes so. However, Cameroon's President Paul Biya, who intends to maintain his relationship with the US, hopes that it will not interfere in Cameroonian affairs. On 19 January – in front of US senators – Antony Blinken was sworn in as US secretary of state. Delaware Democrat Chris Coons asked him about Africa. Blinken replied, saying that “I share your concerns about the recent elections held in Uganda and Cameroon, especially the violence directed against the English-speaking population.” He added that “there are a whole series of places where I think the United States can help make a difference.” Blinken – who is already familiar with Morocco, Djibouti, Nigeria and South Africa – has for years been in favour of a stronger partnership between the US and Africa. In a speech broadcast on 7 February at the 34th African Union summit, US President Joe Biden echoed this sentiment saying that “America is back. [We will work] to renew our role in international institutions and regain our credibility and moral authority.” But what form will this turn of events take? As soon as Biden was elected, Cameroonian opposition leader Maurice Kamto welcomed the news. Congratulating the Democrat, he wrote that “The United States is proving that democracy and democratic institutions matter. So does political change. I look forward to working with the Biden administration on a new path for Cameroon.” A diplomat in Yaoundé adds that “the opposition's future is also at stake in Washington. Due to the crisis in the English-speaking regions and the fact that opponents are being incarcerated, Paul Biya does not have good press there.” Cameroon's President Paul Biya knows that the Anglophone crisis is a subject of concern for Washington, which advocates dialogue to resolve the conflict, while Yaoundé favours the security approach. “For the moment, the United States has not gone further than the stage of declarations, notably at the instigation of the Senate, but the Biden presidency could go a step further,” continues the diplomat. One of Yaoundé's fears is that the new US administration will bring up the Anglophone crisis more regularly during UN Security Council meetings, through their ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield. Thomas-Greenfield, who is an African-American and a seasoned diplomat who was former President Barack Obama's Africa adviser, knows the continent well and met with Biya at a UN General Assembly in 2016. She has already set up a team to work specifically on African issues in New York. “However, Paul Biya does not lack assets, such as his army's fight against Boko Haram, which is important to the Americans,” says an analyst. To conclude: “On the one hand, he does not want to cede anything to the Americans or the opposition regarding the Anglophone crisis. On the other hand, he does not want Cameroon to be blacklisted or for some of its officials to be targeted by sanctions. He has to find a balance between firmness and tact.”

Ngute, the prime minister, who is also a traditional ruler from the Southwest anglophone region. Ngute is a devout member of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party, but he believes a negotiated settlement is the only way out of the crisis, officials close to him confirmed to TNH, speaking anonymously as the talks process remains highly sensitive. The party divisions are not linguistic – anglophone and francophone members of the government are on both sides of the debate. The divide is more related to existing tensions within the CPDM over who will succeed the octogenarian Biya. The separatists face even starker choices over how to end the conflict. While AyukTabe has opted to talk directly to the government, Sako has preferred to wait, building the negotiating capacity of mainly diaspora-based groups through an initiative organised by the Geneva-based conflict mediation NGO Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), and known as the “Swiss process”. The two rival peace approaches – AyukTabe, who is willing to speak directly with the government, and Sako's group, which will only engage through the “Swiss process” – have spurred intense infighting among separatists. “Individual interests have clouded their minds,” Reverend Samuel Fonki, the moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, told TNH from the city of Buea in the anglophone Southwest Region. “They tend to disagree over minuscule issues instead of trying to resolve the [bigger] conflict,” he added. In the war zones, civil society leaders are simply calling for an end to the violence. Civilians are the victims of the conflict – targeted by both the separatists and the government. Women face indiscriminate sexual abuse, and community “lockdowns”, school boycotts, and extortion and kidnappings by separatist fighters have also taken their toll. “This pointless war has taken away too many lives,” Esther Omam, the executive director of the women's empowerment NGO Reach Out, told TNH. “What we desperately need is for both sides to humble themselves by sitting down with one another as brothers.” From his base in Maryland, Sako presides over well-resourced, largely diaspora-based factions. Through a sophisticated online media network, they have been able to raise considerable amounts of money for the separatist cause – although there has been concern over the probity of some of the campaigns. Sako has had a rapid rise from a pastor advertising apostolic healing services to the trappings of power leading a so-called government in exile. He has now staked his political credibility on the “Swiss process”. That effort groups together mainly diaspora-based separatist leaders under the umbrella of the Ambazonia Coalition Team (ACT), created by HD to unite the factions ahead of future talks with Yaoundé. But the initiative has stalled since the last meeting of participants in the fall of 2019. The Cameroon government has consistently rejected the efforts of HD, refusing to discuss even the idea of secession. The conflict mediation NGO has acknowledged the challenges it has faced working in such a “highly polarised environment” – including the basics of “nominating negotiators, designing negotiation strategies”, and adopting “confidence-building measures”. Sako frames Yaoundé's position and the lack of progress as a conspiracy to hurt him personally. “French Cameroon has one last card – destroy the image of Sako/IG [Interim Government] and discredit or kill the Swiss process on the argument that they cannot talk with terrorists,” he told TNH in a WhatsApp message this month. He and his subordinates regularly claim that AyukTabe “may have struck a deal” and is now key to what they charge is the government's strategy of subversion. Although Sako dismissed the leadership of AyukTabe as

“insignificant”, in his WhatsApp message he added: “The only way they can proceed now with the compromised moderates [imprisoned in Kondengui] is to discredit the actors behind the Swiss [process and] take me down”. Locked away in Kondengui, AyukTabe has thus far refused to accept a Swiss mediation role in resolving the conflict. He argues that because Biya is a frequent visitor to Geneva, a city where he reportedly does his banking, his links to the Swiss authorities – who openly support the “Swiss process” and are among the funders of HD – are too close. While the separatists are split over which path to take to peace, for civil society groups in the anglophone regions it is not an either or choice. AyukTabe’s initiative last year was welcomed as a step forward: If the Geneva-based approach ever gets off the ground, that too would be supported. “There is too much contention on the name of the process and not the substance of it,” said Agbor Nkongho of the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, based in Buea – the city separatists aim to make the capital of an independent Ambazonia. “Going forward, it is important to have a holistic process that brings in people from all of the separatist camps and brings in bodies such as the African Union and those willing to serve as mediators – including the Swiss,” he told TNH in September. International impetus to end the conflict is now growing. During his confirmation process at the end of January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken signaled that President Joe Biden would reverse the largely hands-off approach of his predecessor. “I think the United States can make a difference,” Blinken said. France – which still wields some influence in Cameroon, its former colony – has recently begun to voice concerns over the war’s humanitarian toll more loudly, and the Vatican has also added its moral weight to the call for talks. At the end of January, a senior Vatican official, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, visited Yaounde to deliver that message. As an alternative to dialogue, Biya has offered decentralisation and a “special status” for the anglophone regions – steps seen as too little and too late by his critics. He also continues to pursue a violent counter-insurgency strategy. Even if the Biden administration and its international partners were able to pressure the two sides into negotiations, the internal divisions within both the government and separatist camps remain significant hurdles to any meaningful talks to end the bloodshed. Independent civil society groups – largely ignored by both the government and the separatists – say they must be part of any solution and part of efforts to break the deadlock between and amongst the government and separatists. “The role of the grassroots in these talks is imperative,” said Alhadji Mohammed Aboubakar, the influential imam of the Central Mosque in Buea. “They are the ones who are suffering the brunt of this conflict.”

[A Failure to Address the Vulnerability of Men and Boys](#)

By Delphine Brun | March 30, 2021

Every year, events such as the International Women’s Day rightfully sheds light on the structural gender-based discriminations that girls and women bear, and that are exacerbated in times of crises. In the north-west and south-west regions of Cameroon where the socio-political crisis, now entering its fifth year, has led to the displacement of over 700, 000 people, women and girls struggle to make ends meet, face violence and often lack access to essential services such as education and healthcare. With the killing or exile of their husbands, they often have to navigate an unnerving new reality, where all responsibilities lie on their shoulders. While there is an undisputed need for the humanitarian response to address the risks affecting women and girls, the patchy attention that has been given to adolescent boys and men has not allowed for understanding of the gendered impact that crisis has on them. Adolescent boys and men face specific threats and circumstances that leave them vulnerable. Analysis of protection incidents in the south-west region demonstrates that while girls and women are exposed to heightened risks of gender-based violence, more than nine out of ten people exposed to arbitrary arrests, beating, illegal detention, torture, kidnapping, extra-judicial executions and disappearance are males. Being a man or a boy also means being more exposed to targeted armed attacks, with greater risks of injury or death directly related to the conflict. This peculiar exposure to threats is explained by the specific forms of discrimination, harassment and violence they face, from the military authorities and from the non-state armed groups. As it is men who are expected to fight, it is also them who are perceived as threats by both parties. “When the crisis metamorphosed into an armed conflict, the youth was a target for the separatists, who wanted us to join the group. At the same time, the militaries could not think that a young man could be neutral. Women and girls didn’t face this suspicion, as they were not seen as fighters. All the young men had to flee”, explains Firmin, a 24-years-old man, who sought refuge in Yaoundé. Often accused as prime suspects whenever any party is attacked and hurt, any attempt to adopt a neutral stand is doomed to fail: Not giving information is interpreted as a sign of being accomplice. Revealing it, with the risks of retaliation it

entails, doesn't in any way reduce insecurity: "There's no safe position you can adopt", adds Firmin. This prevalent atmosphere of insecurity is aggravated by the fact that many people lack identity documents that have been lost, ceased or destroyed. While women and girls can usually manage to move around and cross check points without carrying proper documentation, men and boys face tremendous risks of being arrested. Caught in a spiral of fear, the male population who has not fled has often reduced its economic and social life to the bare minimum, limiting movement and avoiding gatherings. Boys and men must at all times stay on their guard. They can no longer speak freely, because of the fear of being denounced by military or separatist groups' spies, which could result in abduction. Moving around to get the necessary income, allowing them to play the socially expected role of provider for the family, has often been rendered impossible. For the younger men and boys, loss of employment and increased poverty often combines with attacks on education, further reinforcing their isolation and lack of prospects. If vulnerability is defined by both the external threats characterising a specific environment, and by the coping capacity of those experiencing that environment, adolescent boys and men can clearly be described as a vulnerable group. With no immediate solution foreseen to the ongoing crisis, adolescent boys and men feel dispossessed of control over their life and their future: Lack of proper documentation, restricted mobility, stigmatisation, targeted violence, lack of work and income, all contribute to a sense of helplessness, high amounts of anxiety, stress, frustration, and anger, and ultimately, a loss of self-esteem. Emotions can remain 'locked inside' due to the prevailing view that being a real man is about being tough and not showing fear or sadness. In a society where men are expected to protect and to provide, they often find themselves incapable of fulfilling what is seen and what they understand as being their roles. Men adopt different strategies to cope with the situation. While many have fled to other regions, some decide to join the non-state armed groups, even when not adhering to their cause, to get money and to place their families under the group's protection. Others, who have previously been working as cash crop farmers, decide to engage in livelihood activities such as food crops, that were the domain of women prior to the crisis. Too afraid of being abducted, many boys and men, particularly young ones, stay at home and resign themselves to immobility. To allow their wife to have more time to work outside the house, some of them increasingly play a caregiving and domestic role, engaging in these socially devalued and often invisible tasks that have been the domain of girls and women. Because "women can move where men used to go", they also send their wives to get humanitarian assistance. Due to the demographic imbalance the conflict created, with many men dead, hiding or forced to exile, women are, on their part, playing the role of heads of households and providers for the family. They have engaged in a range of economic and social activities, formally played by men, generating a heavy workload. Some have resorted to undertaking risky activities, such as crossing borders as spies or to buy contraband. They are now the ones digging the graves and burying dead bodies. Positively, the conflict has also opened space for women to play higher public roles, mobilising in favour of peace and having more say in community decisions. But these heightened economic and social roles are not always synonymous with a genuine empowerment. Examining the inter-connections and relations between different groups in crisis-affected communities forces us to recognise that failing to address the vulnerability and needs of adolescent boys and men has direct, or indirect, negative impacts on other groups. When men are arrested, killed or forced to exile, women are also victimised, with more burden and responsibilities and with more frontline activities that place their own safety at risk. In the same vein, lack of prospects and the inability to conform to dominant and yet unattainable models of masculinity affects the male population's well-being and sense of self-worth. It generates frustration, anger, and idleness, often leading to addictions and mental illness, which in turn may create or exacerbate protection risks for the wider community. There is evidence that the distress men face has increased tensions that lead to a significant upsurge in household violence. Failing to adequately acknowledge the devastating implications the crisis has had on boys and men in terms of protection, socioeconomic wellbeing and identity, is not allowing to address their needs and how this affects the wider community. The gendered dimension of conflicts, including an understanding of how the lives of men, women, girls and boys interact, their needs and realities affecting each other, needs to be analysed to develop responses that are truly evidence-based, inclusive and in accordance with needs.