Cameroon Bamileke War (1960–70)

Cameroon, originally colonized by Portugal, came under German control in 1884. Following Germany's defeat in World War II, the territory was split under international mandate between Britain and France. Both British and French Cameroon were considered "trusteeships" and not official colonies. After World War II, the UN mandated that both territories were to be granted independence. In 1948, a group of trade unionists from the Bassa and Bamileke tribal groups created the leftist *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) to advocate for democracy in the new country. The UPC established youth and women's wings and two armed wings.

Stung by its defeat in Indochina in 1954, France was determined to prevent a communist takeover in Cameroon and the loss of its colony in Algeria. The resulting war in Cameroon has largely been forgotten as it was overshadowed by the Algerian War and is sometimes called the "Hidden War" today. The UPC spearheaded the independence movement and, in the wake of France's loss in Indochina, was immediately branded a communist movement. Determined not to lose another colony, the French adopted a harsh counterinsurgency strategy now familiar from the war in Algeria. Although the UPC was openly committed to a peaceful road to independence, it was banned in 1955, and its leaders were forced into exile. In 1958, as part of a stage-managed transition to pseudo-independence, Ahmadou Ahidjo took office as head of government under French trusteeship.

Following this appointment, French forces began a violent suppression of UPC supporters. Troops attacked populations which might support the UPC, starting in Douala and moving on to the capital Yaoundé. Violence included looting, arson, killings, and torture across the Wouri, Mungo, and Bamileke administrative regions within the larger littoral and west regions of the Republic of Cameroon.[1] In response, in 1959, the Bamileke took over the leadership of the resistance and formed a new armed wing, the Cameroon National Liberation Army (ALNK).[2] French Cameroon became notionally independent in 1960 while wracked by ongoing internal violence.

Following a performative 1960 legislative election in which the UPC was prevented from taking part by French authorities, Ahidjo won the General Assembly presidential nomination. The insurgents continued to seek "real independence" and rightly maintained that Ahidjo was a French puppet.[3] The UPC rebels initially also dreamed of reunification with the British Cameroons, but this goal was short lived. In 1961, the British Cameroons to the north voted in a plebiscite conducted by the UN which resulted in the northern half of the colony joining Nigeria and only the southern region being incorporated into the Republic of Cameroon, a source of violence that continues today. An independent Anglophone Cameroon was not on the ballot.

Internal violence continued for another decade. Ahidjo called for aid from the French troops already stationed in the country. The French military campaign of pacification targeted the Bamileke region and pitted French and Cameroonian military personnel against an estimated 1,500 to 3,000 ALNK guerillas at its peak strength, although as many as 200,000 Bamileke may have armed themselves with rudimentary weapons for self-protection.[4] As part of the harsh new French counterinsurgency strategy, government forces razed villages and destroyed property to contain the insurrection. Air raids and combing operations also killed many Bamileke civilians. By 1962, the insurgent area was contained in the center of the country, and operations were transferred to the Cameroon National Army and police.[5] When French troops left Cameroon in 1964, violence declined as the Bamileke population declined. In the following years of the conflict, the Cameroon police assassinated UPC leaders until 1970, when the last significant figure, Ernest Ouandié, was captured and assassinated. An estimated 61,300 to 76,300 civilians were killed during the civil war.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. **Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?**

   No. Colonialism and the French-led period of sham decolonization were designed to handicap a broad sense of a pan-Cameroonian identity. Colonial divide-and-rule policies exacerbated tribalism and rivalries among approximately 200 ethnic groups. There was also a religious divide between the Muslim Fulanis, who dominated the north, and the Christian and animist tribes which populated the southern and coastal areas.[6] A regional tension also appeared between the Anglophone and Francophone regions, which adhered to their secondary languages and cultural practices. In 1958, 580,000 people lived in the Bamileke region of French Cameroon. In 1960, the total post-plebiscite population of Cameroon was about 4.7 million people, of whom the total ethnic Bamileke population (most of whom lived outside the Bamileke region concentration) comprised about 1.5 million or 31.9 percent of the total population.[7] Of this total, approximately 470,000 Bamileke resided in the so-called Bamileke region, already showing a decline from 1958.[8] In 1964, after the mass killings, the Bamileke populations showed further decline and a pattern of emigration, dropping to 550,000 in the western highlands, an area larger than the Bamileke region, implying that the Bamileke region had a resultingly smaller population.[9] By 1970, the population of the Bamileke region had rebounded, as 634,000 were recorded in the area, though not all of these may have been ethnic Bamileke. From 1958–70, the Bamileke population decreased to 10 percent of the total population of Cameroon, bringing the percentage of non-insurgents above the 85 percent threshold, even though a sense of national identity remained elusive.[10]

2. **Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

   No → Yes. During the early period of Ahidjo's tenure as the president of Cameroon, Ahidjo had limited support from the predominantly Christian south of Cameroon, as Ahidjo was a Muslim Fulani from the north.[11] Co-optation allowed a faction of the remaining political party (the *Rallié UPC*), to recognize Ahidjo's right to rule, reflected in the 1960 National Assembly elections. Ahidjo's party, the *Union Camerounaise* (UC) received only 51 of the 100 seats, but in the Assembly's presidential election, he received 89 of the 100 votes.[12] From 1960–72, Ahidjo progressively consolidated and centralized power and institutions within the federal system, strengthening his authority and political legitimacy in Cameroon. The military also considered him legitimate because of deliberate tribal diversity within the military which prevented any ethnic group from holding too much power.[13] By 1964, the insurgent Bamileke people comprised less than 15 percent of the total population of Cameroon (13.8 percent).

By 1966, Ahidjo had created a one-party state under the Cameroon National Union (CNU), purging all political opposition to his regime.[14] Ahidjo built alliances with wealthy businessmen, politicians, and tribal elites, creating a patronage system in trade for loyalty to Ahidjo's regime.[15] Furthermore, Ahidjo's cabinet was handpicked to incorporate and represent ethnic lines across Cameroon.[16] In 1972, the Federal Republic of Cameroon was dissolved into the United Republic of Cameroon. This officially created a centralized government in Yaoundé and dissolved the vestiges of regional governance in Cameroon.[17] Notably, at the UPC's height in 1955, it only marshalled an estimated 100,000 members.[18]

3. **Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?**

    No → Yes. The UPC's cadre and rank and file were exclusively from the Bamileke and Bassa ethnic groups.[19] At the outset of the armed struggle between the UPC and Ahidjo's Franco-Cameroonian government forces in the late 1950's, Ahidjo was unable to exert authority over the Bamileke region.[20] Initially, the ALNK targeted communities in bigger cities, including the capital Yaoundé. After the violent French campaign of pacification began, government troops eventually isolated the conflict to the encircled Bamileke area, spanning from Douala to Bafoussam. In 1960, population estimates put the Bamileke people at 510,000, roughly 10 percent of the overall Cameroonian population, below the 15 percent insurgent population control threshold.[21] Successful Franco-Cameroonian military operations against the UPC resulted in the death of UPC leader Feliz-Roland Moumie, resulting in a decrease in ethnic Bamileke support for the UPC.[22] By 1961, Ahidjo extended amnesty to Bamileke elites in exchange for loyalty with some success. The violent pacification of the UPC's home territory, however, was the decisive strategy Ahidjo used to gain control of the entire Cameroonian state.[23] Even after the UPC created a base on the Congolese border, Cameroonian police secured the border and stormed the base in 1968.[24]

4. **Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

    Yes → No. Before unification of British and French Cameroon into the Federal Republic of Cameroon, many UPC supporters lived in exile in neighboring southern British Cameroon. After unification in October 1961, sanctuary remained possible in neighboring countries.[25] During the early stages of the conflict, the UPC was successful in coordinating military and political operations on the Congolese and Nigerian borders.[26] Exiled UPC leadership cadre were provided sanctuary in Accra, Ghana, to coordinate military and political oversight. The overthrow of Fulbert Youlou in Congo-Brazzaville in August 1963 by Alphonse Massamba-Débat provided a UPC forces with the opportunity to operate from there. Exiled UPC activists and recruits received guerrilla training near Brazzaville alongside militants of the Brazzaville youth movement.[27] When UPC forces were preparing to invade from Congo-Brazzaville, for example, Cameroonian government reports claimed 3,000 UPC militants were involved, though the UPC organization reported only 162 guerillas who invaded from Brazzaville.[28]

    By 1964, however, Ahidjo's government forces were able to militarily dismantle UPC cross-border operations.[29] The Nigerian border was shut down in 1964 due to increased military presence.[30] Surrounding and isolating the central interior Bamileke region reduced access to the border with Congo, and French and Cameroonian forces increased border patrols and raids. For example, when the UPC created a base on the Congolese border, Cameroonian police secured the border and stormed the base

in 1968.[31] Furthermore, the USSR and China, the largest UPC sponsors of Ghana, rescinded their logistical support and recognized Ahidjo's Cameroonian regime as legitimate.[32] When Massamba-Débat was overthrown in Congo, support for the UPC there ended as well and the sanctuary guerilla bases were shut down. Some UPC guerillas remained in exile in the Congo until the end of the insurgency, but militarily significant cross-border sanctuary was effectively curtailed by 1969.[33]

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

   Yes. At the start of the conflict, there was a small indigenous defense force, and Ahidjo also deployed French troops already stationed in Cameroon from the recent trusteeship. The French also brought troops from French Equatorial Africa and French West Africa to fight the insurgents. Although they were French, they fought under Cameroon's control. The French signed an agreement which helped form a Cameroon National Army, Police, and National Defense Supreme Council. From 1962–64, the security forces transitioned from French control to the Cameroonian government.[34]

Outcome

Government victory. This case is in a grey area, as it could be considered a war of colonial liberation rather than a true insurgency. At the beginning of the internal conflict, French Cameroon was still a de facto colony of France. This case is included to consider the trajectory of the Five Factors after notional independence under a French protectorate. Three of the five shifted from "red" to "green" during the conflict.

This case is also an outlier, as despite "nation creation" efforts by its president, by any definition, personal identity remained along ethnolinguistic lines. Thus, Cameroon lacked a national identity throughout the conflict period, but the government eventually prevailed in the conflict. Throughout the French campaign for pacification, systematic violence was directed against all people in the Bamileke region, whether known insurgents, suspected insurgents, or civilians. In the aftermath, the French leadership admitted to overuse of violent attacks, but it crushed the UPC opposition. Overall violence declined in 1964 when the French troops departed, but the Cameroonian police continued to target UPC leadership.[35] The isolation and surrounding of the Bamileke region by security forces, combined with political changes in the bordering countries, effectively eliminated militarily significant access to external sanctuary. By the end of the conflict, the UPC were reduced to less than 150 guerillas who no longer posed a security threat.[36] Casualty reports were not precise, but military reports claimed deaths between 300,000 to 400,000 Bamileke people.[37] The Bamileke tribe remained the largest opposition group to the government, but continued its resistance along legal lines that did not meet the criteria of an armed internal conflict. This case supports the Five Factors model.

CAMEROON BAMILEKE WAR 1960–70		
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO	
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO →	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	NO →	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES →	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES	

Endnotes

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21.   Sharp, "International Possibilities," 123.

22.   Sharp, "International Possibilities," 145.

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