

Reimagining Sovereignty and Citizenship in Africa: The Case of the So-called Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon

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As citizens increasingly redefine their roles in the political sphere, the relationship between the state and society is evolving, raising critical questions about identity, governance, and sovereignty. This article examines these dynamics in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, where challenges to state authority reflect a dialectical tension between preserving an outdated form of citizenship and constructing a new one with a renewed social contract. Using a constructivist framework, which emphasizes the role of social identities, norms, and discourses, this study explores sovereignty as a shared and contested concept, continuously redefined by social actors. Through a qualitative approach, it analyses how active citizenship emerges as a response to state shortcomings, questioning its legitimacy and governance model. The findings reveal that the contestation of state authority in the Anglophone regions fosters alternative forms of citizenship and local governance, reshaping sovereignty from below. These practices challenge the state's monopoly over sovereignty, promoting grassroots participation and new governance structures. The evolving dynamics highlight a redefinition of state-society relations, where sovereignty is no longer exclusively dictated by the state but increasingly shaped by local actors. By emphasizing the dual process of contestation and creativity, this contribution reveals that the rejection of the Cameroonian state's sovereign model is not merely a rebellion but a transformative effort to establish localized governance and democratic participation. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the crisis in the Anglophone regions is not just a challenge to authority but a broader reimagination of sovereignty and citizenship in Africa.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Citizenship, Governance, Contestation, State Legitimacy

Introduction

When citizens redefine their roles in the political sphere—refusing the identity the state assigns them, building their own governance institutions, and asserting new frameworks of belonging—the relationship between state and society enters a period of transformative crisis. This is, in essence, what structures the so-called “anglophone problem” in terms of root causes and consequences. It comes down to saying, as Foucault (2001) does, that there exists in this zone a work of subjectivation constitutive of resistance to political power. Cameroon's North West and South West regions are historically known as Southern Cameroons, referred to by some activists as Ambazonia¹ (Pommerolle, 2024, pp. 151-178).

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¹ The primary creator of the term and concept of Ambazonia is Fon Gorji-Dinka, a Cameroonian lawyer and politician who formalized the name on March 20, 1985, to refer to Southern Cameroons. Gorji-Dinka was a former Bar Council President, he popularized the name “Ambazonia” and demanded the independence of this entity, notably after being arrested and exiled. The Ambazonia is a self-proclaimed republic declared by Anglophone separatists in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. During the period 2016-2017 national opinion discover the interim government of Ambazonia in exile, led by Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, who is often considered a central figure in the current crisis.

Since the escalation of the Anglophone conflict in late 2016, at least 6,000 civilians have been killed by both government forces and separatist fighters (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024), for International Crisis Group (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2026), it is over 6,500 lives, and more than 580,000 people displaced, for others, more than 638,000 people have been internally displaced, while tens of thousands have sought refuge in neighbouring Nigeria. Humanitarian conditions remain severe, with at least 1.7 million people in need of assistance in the Anglophone regions alone (HRW, 2024). Human Rights Watch (2022) documented a consistent pattern of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, and village-burning by Cameroonian security forces in the Anglophone regions. The conflict has also devastated education, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of schooling as attacks, insecurity, and prolonged lockdowns continue to disrupt daily life. The Norwegian Refugee Council has repeatedly classified Cameroon among the world's most neglected displacement crises.

Yet behind these statistics lies a preoccupation related to what happens when a part of citizens no longer recognises the state's authority to define political belonging, legitimacy, and obligation. This constitutes a profound experiment in the reimagination of sovereignty and citizenship from below. Precisely, 2017 is a period where some anglophone protest leaders declare symbolic independence for Southern Cameroon, which separatists call Ambazonia (ICG, 2023). Government troops brutally crack down on pro-independence demonstrations, killing dozens of civilians. As the government intensifies arrests, people start to form self-defence militias. Beyond its security dimension, the crisis reflects deeper tensions related to governance, identity, state legitimacy, and the nature of political belonging in postcolonial Cameroon.

We understand by "reimagining sovereignty" the process through which the traditional understanding of state authority is questioned, contested, and reconstructed in response to political crises, social transformations, and governance failures. Rather than viewing sovereignty as a fixed and absolute authority exercised exclusively by the state, this study approaches it as a socially negotiated and relational concept whose legitimacy depends on recognition by citizens and other political actors. In the context of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, reimagining sovereignty reflects the emergence of alternative claims to authority, competing systems of governance, and new forms of political legitimacy developed by local communities, separatist movements, diaspora actors, and civil society groups.

It is also considered that citizenship refers to the relationship between individuals and the political community to which they belong. Traditionally, citizenship is associated with legal rights, duties, political participation, and national identity within the framework of the state. However, in situations of conflict and contested authority, citizenship becomes dynamic and negotiable rather than fixed (Sindjoun, 1998). In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, citizenship increasingly reflects practices of resistance (Foucault, 2001), alternative political participation, diasporic engagement, and the search for recognition outside the dominant state framework. The study therefore understands citizenship not only as a legal status but also as a socially constructed form of belonging continuously redefined through conflict, identity politics, and struggles over legitimacy.

More specifically, it is sought to understand how conflict, governance failures, and identity-based mobilization have transformed both the exercise of sovereignty and the meaning of citizenship in the Anglophone regions, thereby revealing broader challenges facing the African postcolonial state and its social contract. In other words, how does the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon contribute to the reimagination of sovereignty and citizenship through the contestation of state legitimacy and the emergence of alternative forms of political belonging and governance? This perspective is inspired by constructivist scholarship, particularly the works of

Alexander Wendt and Stephen Krasner, which emphasize that sovereignty is continuously shaped through social interaction, recognition, and contestation.

Constructivism holds that the identities, norms, and discourses of social actors are not fixed natural data but socially constructed, historically contingent, and politically contestable. Applied to sovereignty and citizenship, constructivism insists that these concepts are not simply legal categories imposed from above by states but shared and contested social meanings continuously redefined by the practices of multiple actors—states, civil society organisations, armed groups, diaspora communities, and ordinary citizens (Wendt, 1999; Ruggie, 1998). Sovereignty, on this view, is not only an attribute of the state but a relational achievement that depends on recognition, both external (by other states) and internal (by the governed population). The Cameroonian Anglophone crisis is, in constructivist terms, a crisis of sovereign recognition: a growing refusal by a part of Anglophone citizens to recognise the Cameroonian state as the legitimate sovereign of their political community, and a simultaneous, experimental, and often violent effort to construct alternative forms of political authority and belonging. Here is analysed that dual process—the contestation of the old sovereignty and the construction of the new.

The present work makes three principal contributions. First, it applies a constructivist framework systematically to the Anglophone crisis, moving beyond both statist accounts (which reduce the crisis to terrorism or secessionism) and purely legal accounts (which reduce it to questions of self-determination law). In concrete terms, we have a sort of fragmentation of sovereignty which examines how rights abuses, state violence, and the retreat of state institutions or the power state weak control have affected the Cameroonian state's domestic sovereignty in the Anglophone regions, and how alternative actors have emerged to fill the resulting political vacuum. It draws on Stephen Krasner's theory of contested sovereignty (1999), Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (2003). Also, we mobilise the concept of "plastic citizenship", which is helpful to analyses how some Anglophone communities have responded to state failure by developing new, creative, and adaptive practices of political participation and civic identity that this article, drawing on Aihwa Ong's concept of flexible citizenship (1999), terms "plastic citizenship". It traces the politicisation of Anglophone identity as a form of contestatory citizenship, the emergence of digital and diasporic civic innovation, and the policy implications—for accountability, institutional reform, and the renewal of the social contract—that follow from the analysis.

Second, it introduces the concept of "plastic citizenship" to capture the adaptive, hybrid, and multiply-situated nature of Anglophone civic practices in conditions of sovereign fragmentation. Plastic citizenship refers to a fluid, adaptive, and continuously reconfigured form of political belonging that emerges in contexts where state legitimacy, sovereignty, and the social contract are contested. Unlike conventional citizenship tied to stable state authority, plastic citizenship is shaped by conflict, insecurity, alternative governance structures, digital activism, diasporic engagement, and everyday practices of resistance and survival. It reflects the capacity of citizens to renegotiate their identities, loyalties, and modes of political participation in response to fragmented sovereignty and institutional failure. From a constructivist perspective, plastic citizenship describes the socially constructed and constantly evolving character of citizenship in contexts where political authority is disputed and citizens actively reshape the meanings of belonging, legitimacy, and participation.

Moreover, we use quantitative governance data alongside qualitative evidence to demonstrate that the crisis is, at its foundation, a failure of the social contract—and that the conditions for renewing it require structural institutional reform, not merely security responses. The body of this contribution tries to examine

the fragmentation of sovereignty in terms of contestation, erosion, and reconfiguration of state authority (I) and plastic citizenship in terms of contested belonging, new practices of participation, and the social contract (II).

I. Fragmentation of Sovereignty: Contestation, Erosion, and Reconfiguration of State Authority

I.A. Contested Sovereignty: Legitimacy Crisis, Rights Abuses, and the Retreat of the State

The theoretical lens: Krasner's contested sovereignty and legitimacy literature.

The dominant theorisation of sovereignty as an absolute, indivisible attribute of the modern state has been fundamentally challenged by Stephen Krasner's framework of "contested sovereignty" and "organised hypocrisy" (Krasner, 1999; 2001). Krasner distinguishes four dimensions of sovereignty: international legal sovereignty (mutual recognition between states), Westphalian sovereignty (exclusion of external authority from domestic affairs), domestic sovereignty (effective authority and monopoly on legitimate violence within a territory), and interdependence sovereignty (control over cross-border flows). His central argument is that these dimensions routinely diverge in practice—creating a condition he terms "organised hypocrisy": the maintenance of sovereignty norms in rhetoric while systematically violating them in practice.

Mbembe (2000) also argued that African sovereignty has always been practised "at the edge of the world"—at the boundaries between colonial inheritance and postcolonial reinvention, between international recognition and internal legitimation. Applied to Cameroon, Krasner's framework is diagnostically precise. The Cameroonian state maintains robust international legal sovereignty—its UN membership, African Union standing, and territorial integrity are unquestioned by any recognised foreign government. It invokes Westphalian sovereignty aggressively, rejecting Swiss mediation in September 2022 and insisting on what it terms an "endogenous solution" to the Anglophone crisis (ICG, 2023). Yet its domestic sovereignty—the dimension that directly matters to Anglophone citizens—has been catastrophically eroded. Significant rural areas of the North West and South West are beyond effective state control; main roads are subject to non-state checkpoints; and the state's monopoly on legitimate violence has been fundamentally disrupted.

The legitimacy literature provides the normative complement to Krasner's analytical framework. From Weber's foundational sociology of legitimate domination (1919/1946) to contemporary theories of state fragility (Rotberg, 2004) and the social contract tradition from Locke to Rawls, a consistent argument emerges: state authority depends not only on the capacity for coercion but also on the perceived rightfulness of its exercise. A state that kills civilians, burns villages, tortures detainees, and responds to professional grievances with military force has severed the normative bond between ruler and ruled—and has, in the most basic terms of political philosophy, lost its claim to legitimate sovereignty over those communities.

Constructivist theory adds a further dimension: sovereignty is not merely a legal status or a coercive capacity but a social fact—something that exists because relevant actors believe in and act upon it (Wendt, 1999). When enough Anglophone Cameroonians cease to recognise the Cameroonian state as their legitimate sovereign—when they stop sending their children to state schools, refuse to use state courts, do not fly the national flag, and take up arms against the national army—the social fact of sovereignty is dissolving in that space, regardless of the formal legal category maintained in international law. This is precisely the constructivist insight that standard IR accounts of the Cameroon crisis miss: it is not primarily about international recognition but about the collapse of internal legitimation.

The evidence: A documented pattern of violations.

State security force abuses. The empirical record of state violence in the Anglophone regions is detailed, cross-verified, and unambiguous. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and independent academic researchers have documented a consistent pattern of violations by Cameroonian security forces—principally the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), the military, and the gendarmerie. In Foucauldian terms, that deployment of military force against civilian protestors constitutes a disciplinary technology of power—a mechanism through which the state attempts to produce compliant subjects rather than active citizens (Foucault, 1975).

Human Rights Watch’s 2024 World Report states that at least 6,000 civilians have been killed by both government forces and separatist fighters since the violence started in late 2016. The report documents continued unlawful killings, abductions, and raids on villages in the second half of 2023 alone. Cases of sexual and gender-based violence by state forces are specifically noted, as is the state’s systematic failure to protect civilians or prosecute perpetrators (HRW, 2024). Bang and Balgah (2022) characterise the cumulative effects of the crisis as a looming “Complex Disaster Emergency”—a convergence of armed conflict, humanitarian collapse, and institutional failure

Among the most documented specific incidents is the Ngarbuh massacre of 14 February 2020, in which soldiers of the BIR killed at least 21 civilians—including 13 children and a pregnant woman—while burning their homes. The Cameroonian government initially denied the killings, then attributed them to a confrontation with armed separatists, before acknowledging military responsibility under sustained international pressure. The prosecutions that followed were widely regarded as inadequate—a pattern consistent with what the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) measures as the near-collapse of the rule of law in Cameroon (World Bank, 2024).

Arbitrary arrests and detention have been systematic. The Cameroonian government declared a state of emergency in the Anglophone regions and, using a 2014 counter-terrorism law, detained hundreds of protesters, lawyers, civil society leaders, and journalists in conditions that Amnesty International described as constituting torture. The jailing of the leader of the Ambazonia Interim Government, Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, and nine other leaders following their 2018 rendition from Nigeria—in proceedings that violated Cameroonian domestic law and international extradition norms—sent an unambiguous message: the state regarded any form of organised Anglophone political leadership as a criminal enterprise. The opinion saw on it another kind of violation in continuity to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights which found in *Gunme et al. v. Cameroon* (2009) that the rights of the people of Southern Cameroons under the Banjul Charter had been violated—a ruling the Cameroonian state has never implemented.

School closures represent another dimension of state-contributed collapse. Human Rights Watch documented that at least 2,245 schools were not functioning in the Anglophone regions due to attacks and threats—by both armed separatist groups and, in some cases, by security forces that occupied school buildings as barracks (HRW, 2024). Still in 2026, many governmental schools are not functioning. The result is an educational emergency affecting approximately 700,000 children, which the ICG’s 2024 analysis flagged as particularly damaging to women, on whom the care burden of out-of-school children disproportionately falls (ICG, 2024).

Separatist Group Abuses and the Circle of Violence.

The constructivist analysis does not attribute all violence to the state. Armed separatist groups—including the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC), the Southern Cameroons Liberation Council (SCLC), and numerous local militias—have themselves committed serious abuses that further

erode civilian security and, paradoxically, undermine the legitimacy of the separatist cause. These include the kidnapping and killing of civilians accused of collaboration with the state, the burning of government buildings and vehicles, the violent enforcement of indefinite “ghost towns” (economic shutdowns) that have destroyed local livelihoods, and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in civilian areas.

Amnesty International’s 2023 investigation into the North West region documented specific incidents of IED deployment by separatist groups at civilian events, including during the Mount Cameroon race in February 2023 (Amnesty International, 2023). The mutual atrocity dynamic—each side committing abuses that justify retaliatory violence by the other—has become self-sustaining, trapping civilians in a permanent condition of insecurity. It is this dynamic that the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (Global R2P) has characterised as consistent with crimes against humanity by multiple parties to the conflict (Global R2P, 2026).

Governance Data: Measuring Sovereign Erosion.

The World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) provide a quantitative dimension to what human rights reports document qualitatively. Table 1 presents Cameroon’s 2023 scores across the five most relevant governance dimensions:

Table 1

Cameroon: Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2023

WGI Dimension	Score (2023)	Percentile	Direction
Political Stability & Absence of Violence	-1.40	11.4th	▼ Declining
Voice & Accountability	-1.07	19.6th	– Stagnant
Government Effectiveness	-0.62	17.5th	– Low
Control of Corruption	-0.70	~20th	– Low
Rule of Law	-0.57	~24th	▼ Declining

Source: World Bank WGI (2024 Update); TheGlobalEconomy.com (2025a; 2025b); Trading Economics (2025a; 2025b); World Bank WGI (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2024). Scale: -2.5 (weakest governance) to +2.5 (strongest). Percentile rank: 0 = lowest, 100 = highest.

The following indicators are drawn from the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators methodology (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2024), which measures governance across six dimensions on a scale of -2.5 to +2.5. Cameroon’s Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism score of -1.40 in 2023 places the country in only the 11.4th percentile globally—reflecting acute deterioration driven by the Anglophone conflict and the concurrent Boko Haram insurgency in the Far North. Its Voice and Accountability score of -1.07 (19.6th percentile) confirms the systematic restriction of civic participation, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. Control of Corruption at approximately the 20th percentile and Rule of Law at approximately the 24th percentile describe an institutional landscape in which coercion routinely substitutes for law and in which impunity for rights violations is structural rather than exceptional (Trading Economics, 2025a; 2025b; World Bank, 2024).

From a constructivist perspective, these numbers are not merely statistical: they are indicators of the collapse of the institutional frameworks through which a state communicates its norms to its citizens and earns their voluntary compliance. A state that scores in the 11th percentile on political stability is one whose claim to be the legitimate ordering principle of social life has, for a large portion of its territory, ceased to persuade.

The Retreat of the State and the Social Contract.

The concept of the social contract—from Hobbes’s exchange of liberty for security, through Locke’s conditional grant of authority, to Rawls’s principles of justice agreed behind the veil of ignorance—holds that

state authority is legitimate only insofar as it fulfils obligations to its citizens: protecting their security, enforcing their rights, providing public goods, and representing their interests in collective decisions. When the state systematically fails to perform these functions for a specific community—and, worse, when it actively becomes a source of violence against that community—the normative foundations of the social contract dissolve.

In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, the state has retreated from its social contract obligations in multiple simultaneous dimensions. It has failed to protect Anglophone citizens from violence—including violence perpetrated by its own security forces. It has failed to deliver education, with 2,245 schools non-functional. It has failed to administer justice equitably—Anglophone lawyers and litigants are routinely subjected to proceedings conducted in French, violating the state’s own bilingualism commitments. It has failed to represent Anglophone interests in national governance—the *Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais* (RDPC/CPDM), in power since 1982, has been dominated mostly by Francophone elites, with key cabinet portfolios—Defence, Finance, and Foreign Affairs—disproportionately held by Francophones (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Ayafor (2005) demonstrated that official bilingualism in Cameroon has functioned as an instrumental rather than integrative policy—maintaining the legal form of linguistic equality while structurally privileging French in all domains of state power.

The result is what Mamdani (1996) would recognise as the reproduction of the citizen-subject bifurcation in postcolonial form: Anglophone Cameroonians are formally citizens—their passports say “République du Cameroun”—but they are governed as subjects, through a combination of administrative exclusion, linguistic marginalisation, and, when they resist, military force. It is this condition of stratified citizenship that has generated the political crisis. And it is from this condition that the new practices of Anglophone citizenship.

I.B. Rise of Alternative Actors and Parallel Governance

When the state retreats from its sovereign functions—whether through incapacity, deliberate exclusion, or violent collapse—a political vacuum is created that other actors move to fill. The academic literature on “hybrid political orders” (Boege et al., 2009), “rebel governance” (Arjona, Kasfir, & Mampilly, 2015), and “fragmented sovereignty” (Risse, 2011) has established that in conditions of state failure or retreat, non-state actors do not merely contest authority; they build institutions, adjudicate disputes, regulate behaviour, and provide social services. The resulting political order is neither fully a state system nor its simple absence but a layered, contested, and often violent configuration of competing governance claims. As early 2019, international opinion warned that the crisis has reached a crossroads, with armed groups multiplying and the window for negotiated resolution narrowing rapidly (ICG, 2019).

From a constructivist perspective, parallel governance is analytically significant precisely because it involves the construction of alternative social facts about authority and legitimacy. Foucault (2004) through the concept of governmentality, illuminates how non-state actors attempt to develop their own technologies of governance, managing populations through security arrangements, taxation, and justice mechanisms that can compete directly with the state’s sovereignty claims. When a separatist committee enforces a “ghost town” every Mondays and public holidays, proscribes CEMAC plates on vehicles in all Bamenda and Buea cities, or collects a “tax” from a market trader, it is not merely exercising coercive power; it is performing sovereignty—enacting the claim that it, and not the Cameroonian state, is the relevant authority in that space. Whether that claim is accepted, resisted, or accepted-under-duress by local populations determines the actual social reality of governance in that location.

In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, parallel governance has developed through overlapping layers: armed separatist political structures, local community security arrangements, traditional authority networks, and diasporic political organisations. These layers interact in complex and often contradictory ways, producing a governance landscape that the International Crisis Group has characterised as one of the most intricate and fragmented in sub-Saharan Africa (ICG, 2023).

The most institutionally ambitious attempt at alternative governance is the Ambazonia Interim Government (IG), originally led by Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe (arrested in Nigeria in January 2018 and imprisoned in Cameroon) and subsequently by acting leadership based largely in the diaspora. The IG claims formal governmental authority over the territory of “Ambazonia”, maintains an Ambazonia Security Council that nominally coordinates several armed groups, and has sought—without success—international diplomatic recognition.

Below the level of the IG, local separatist committees have established rough justice mechanisms in areas effectively beyond state control. These committees adjudicate disputes, enforce curfews, manage the distribution of humanitarian aid (or prevent its distribution to communities perceived as pro-government), and enforce the school boycott that has been one of the most contested features of the separatist strategy. The World Bank’s 2021 socio-political impact study described this as a condition of “overlapping non-state armed group authority”, noting that multiple factions—the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC), the Southern Cameroons Restoration Forces (SCRF), and others—control different sub-territories with minimal coordination and frequent violent competition among themselves (World Bank, 2021).

A 2023 article in *Small Wars & Insurgencies* analysed the “transnationalization” of the conflict and the political sociology of transnational rebel governance, finding that diaspora funding and political direction sustain the armed conflict financially while simultaneously preventing pragmatic compromise by radicalising the political agenda of fighters on the ground. The study noted that organisational belonging on the ground shifts rapidly, creating a fluid and fragmented governance landscape in which no single actor commands consistent authority across the Anglophone territory (Ketzmerick, 2023).

Alongside the formal separatist structures, local communities in the Anglophone regions have developed more organic governance mechanisms in response to insecurity from multiple sources. Traditional fons (chiefs) in the North West and paramount chiefs in the South West have played a central—if deeply contested—role as governance intermediaries. These traditional rulers possess genuine legitimacy in their communities, rooted in cultural authority and long-standing social relationships. They have been sought by both the Cameroonian government (for “peace messaging” initiatives) and separatist groups (as community mobilisers).

Community-based security arrangements—neighbourhood watch groups, market-area associations, and village youth organisations—have in some areas provided a degree of protection that neither the state military nor separatist armed groups offer civilians. These arrangements are fragile, sometimes tribally coded, and vulnerable to co-optation or intimidation by armed actors. But they represent genuine civic initiative: people organising to provide for themselves what the state has failed to deliver.

Local justice mechanisms—drawing on customary law traditions, elder mediation, and community arbitration—have similarly emerged to fill the gap left by the collapse of the formal court system. In areas where magistrates have fled, courthouses have been burned, and French-speaking judges cannot safely travel, disputes over land, inheritance, and commercial relationships are resolved through customary mechanisms. This is governance below and beyond the state—the kind of “metis” (practical local knowledge) that Scott (1998) identifies as the characteristic response of communities to the failure of formal institutional solutions.

The Anglophone crisis has been uniquely shaped by the political mobilisation of a large and well-resourced diaspora concentrated in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany. Diasporic organisations—principally the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC) and various online political networks—have raised funds for armed groups, coordinated international advocacy campaigns, managed social media information operations, and claimed political authority over the Anglophone independence movement.

This diasporic sovereignty claim is paradoxical and politically destabilising. Diaspora actors possess financial resources and international access that ground-level armed group commanders lack. But they are physically absent from the conflict zone and therefore not directly subject to its consequences. The result, documented in the 2021 University of San Francisco dissertation on “Virtual Ambazonia”, is a pattern in which diaspora hardliners—whose own safety is not at risk—sustain maximalist political positions (full independence, no compromise, intensified armed struggle) that a pragmatic majority within the Anglophone regions might, under different conditions, be willing to abandon in favour of a negotiated federalism compromise (Repository.USFCA.edu, 2021).

The International Crisis Group’s 2023 briefing specifically noted that the fragmentation of separatist groups, driven by competing diaspora sponsors, constitutes a primary obstacle to peace negotiations: the multiplication of armed factions makes it impossible to identify a credible negotiating counterpart, while diaspora funders’ competition for influence prevents the consolidation of a unified separatist political position (ICG, 2023).

The territorial implications are equally significant. The persistence of parallel governance structures—however fragmented and contested—means that the Cameroonian state’s effective sovereignty over the Anglophone regions has been reduced to what it can militarily enforce in each location on each day. Roads, villages, and even administrative towns shift between state and non-state control. This is the practical meaning of what Krasner calls the erosion of domestic sovereignty: not the dramatic collapse of the state but the slow, contested, and spatially uneven withdrawal of its authority from the everyday lives of citizens who need it most.

II. Plastic Citizenship: Contested Belonging, New Practices of Participation, and the Social Contract

II.A. Resistance, Identity, and Contestatory Citizenship

Citizenship, in its standard legal definition, is a status: the set of rights and obligations that flow from membership in a recognised political community. But political sociologists and citizenship theorists have long argued that this definition is inadequate—that citizenship is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a practice: a way of acting in relation to political authority, of claiming rights, of resisting exclusion, and of constituting the political community itself through acts of assertion and resistance (Isin & Wood, 1999; Bosniak, 2006). Sindjoun (1998) coined the term “*politique d’affection*” to describe precisely this dynamic where identity is used in competition for access to state power and public goods. Citizenship as practice cannot be reduced to what the state grants; it includes what citizens do—and refuse to do—in relation to the state.

From a constructivist perspective, citizenship practices are also constitutive of identity. When Anglophone teachers refused to apply a Francophone curriculum, they were not only making a professional claim; they were asserting that their identity—their Anglophone-ness, their Common Law traditions, their General Certificate of Education (GCE) educational culture—was not a subordinate variant of a Francophone national norm but a co-equal component of a genuinely bilingual and bicultural state. When Anglophone lawyers struck against the appointment of French-speaking judges to their courts, they were refusing to accept the identity that the

Cameroonian state assigned them: second-class citizens whose legal culture could be administratively dissolved. These acts of professional refusal were, simultaneously, acts of citizenship assertion.

Mahmood Mamdani's citizen-subject framework (1996) provides the structural context: Anglophone Cameroonians are formal citizens of a state whose institutional practices treat them as subjects—governed through administrative decree and military force rather than through law and civic representation. The dialectical tension between this formal citizenship and the lived experience of subjecthood is precisely what, in the constructivist account, drives the politicisation of identity and the emergence of contestatory citizenship.

Anglophone identity in Cameroon is a colonial artefact that has been transformed through political experience into a powerful civic and political resource. The British colonial administration of the Southern Cameroons trust territory created specific institutions—the Common Law system, the GCE educational framework, the parliamentary political culture of Buea—that became the markers of Anglophone distinctiveness after the 1961 reunification. Njumbe (2010) argued that the 1961 plebiscite, by excluding the option of full independence, violated the very principle of self-determination it purported to implement—a founding illegitimacy that continues to animate Anglophone constitutional grievances. The progressive erosion of these institutions by the Francophone-dominated unitary state, from the abolition of the federal structure in 1972 to the renaming of the country as “La République du Cameroun” in 1984, converted cultural distinctiveness into political grievance. Awasom (2004) traces how autochthonization politics in Cameroon systematically produced crises of citizenship by rendering certain communities structurally exterior to the national political compact. The abolition of the federal structure in 1972 analysed in detail by Ngoh (2004), was the constitutional rupture that Anglophone political actors have never accepted as legitimate. Authors like Konings and Nyamnjoh (2003) demonstrated that Anglophone identity in Cameroon is not a primordial cultural essence but a political construction forged through the experience of marginalisation—a negotiated identity whose content has been continuously reshaped by the state's refusal to recognise it.

The 2016 protests marked a qualitative rupture in this process. What had previously been articulated through institutional channels—the Social Democratic Front (SDF), professional unions, and civil society—became a popular civic movement crossing class, gender, and generational lines. The Cameroonian Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), which organised the initial lawyer and teacher strikes, was not a secessionist organisation; it was a civic body demanding the enforcement of existing constitutional bilingualism commitments. The state's response—the deployment of the BIR, mass arrests, internet shutdowns, and the labelling of professional protesters as “terrorists”—transformed a constitutional dispute into an existential political confrontation.

The constructivist insight here is crucial: repression did not suppress the politicisation of Anglophone identity; it deepened and radicalised it. Each violent government response produced a new stratum of radicalised civic actors. The killing of protesters in October and November 2017 accelerated the shift from demands for federalism to demands for independence. The arrest and rendition of the Ambazonian leadership in January 2018 transformed the IG into martyrs of the independence movement. The Ngarbuh massacre of February 2020 fuelled international outrage and intensified diaspora fundraising for armed groups. State violence, in the constructivist account, does not eliminate the social norms and identities that drive resistance; it reinforces them by confirming the narrative of oppression that mobilises the resistance. Mbembe's account of the postcolony describes precisely this configuration: an authority that rules not through consent but through the theatrical deployment of violence—an “aesthetics of vulgarity” in which power is performed rather than earned (Mbembe, 2001). The contestation

of state authority in the Anglophone regions fosters alternative forms of citizenship and local governance, reshaping sovereignty from below. These practices challenge the state's monopoly over sovereignty, promoting grassroots participation and new governance structures.

The initial vectors of Anglophone civic resistance—the legal and teaching professions—were not revolutionary actors but conservative ones: they sought the enforcement of existing law, not its overthrow. The Common Law Bar Association of Cameroon's refusal to appear before courts that functioned in French was a strictly legalist demand, grounded in the constitutional commitment to bilingualism and the 1961 federal compact. The teachers' strikes against the posting of Francophone headmasters to Anglophone schools and the use of French-language administrative forms in Anglophone educational institutions were similarly grounded in existing legal rights.

The state's decision to treat these legal demands as security threats—arresting union leaders under counter-terrorism legislation, deploying military forces to enforce school and court attendance, and conducting internet shutdowns across the Anglophone regions—was a fundamental political miscalculation that converted legalist civic contestation into revolutionary political mobilisation. In constructivist terms, it was the state itself, through its repressive response, that constructed the Anglophone crisis as a sovereignty confrontation rather than a professional dispute.

Women's civic organisations have played a specifically significant and underanalysed role in the contestatory citizenship landscape. The South West/North West Women's Task Force (SNWOT) and its "we want dialogue" and "stop the killing" campaigns represent a form of active citizenship that refuses the binary offered by both the government (submission or terrorism) and the separatist movement (full independence or complicity). Operating at extreme personal risk, these organisations have lobbied government officials, organised peaceful demonstrations, documented atrocities, and maintained channels of communication with communities across the conflict zone (Mutah, 2022). Their civic practice is precisely what constructivist citizenship theory identifies as transformative: it does not accept the rules of the political game as they are but insists on playing by the rules that the state itself has proclaimed—and thereby exposes the state's failure to honour its own norms.

The political sociology of civil resistance has consistently found that disproportionate state repression against non-violent movements produces one of two trajectories: demobilisation through terror, or radicalisation through the crystallisation and amplification of grievance. In Cameroon's Anglophone regions, both trajectories have occurred simultaneously in different segments of the population—and the balance between them has shifted progressively toward radicalisation as the conflict has deepened.

What is most analytically significant, from a constructivist perspective, is that the radicalisation has not destroyed civic culture; it has transformed it. The same communities that produced the lawyers' and teachers' strike of 2016 also produced the Women's Task Force of 2018, the home-schooling networks of 2019, and the community health and food security initiatives of 2020–2026. Civic identity—the sense of being an active member of a political community with rights worth defending—has survived and, in some dimensions, deepened through the experience of repression. This is the sociological foundation of what Part II.B analyses as the emergence of "plastic citizenship".

II.B. Emerging Civic Practices and Prospects for a Renewed Social Contract

Aihwa Ong's concept of "flexible citizenship", developed in *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Ong, 1999), captures the way in which, in a globalised world, citizenship is not a fixed and

unitary status but a set of adaptive strategies through which people navigate multiple jurisdictions, identity claims, and governance frameworks to secure their interests and assert their agency. Ong's empirical focus was on transnational Chinese capitalists who hold multiple passports and shift residences strategically across state jurisdictions. But the analytical core of the concept—that citizenship is a creative, adaptive, and multiply-situated practice rather than a fixed legal attribute—applies, with critical modification, to the Anglophone Cameroonian experience.

This article adapts and extends Ong's framework under the label "plastic citizenship"—chosen to emphasise both the adaptive flexibility of Anglophone civic practices (plastic as in pliable, creative, and adaptive to structural constraints) and their formative potential (plastic as in capable of shaping new political forms). Plastic citizenship, as used here, refers to the repertoire of creative, hybrid, and multiply-situated civic practices that emerge when formal citizenship fails—when the state's legal framework neither protects nor represents a community, but the community refuses both passive acceptance and simply oppositional rejection of the political order.

Plastic citizenship is neither the assertion of formal citizenship within the existing state (which is structurally blocked for Anglophones) nor the simple rejection of citizenship in favour of independence (which is the separatist position). It is the creative space between these poles: the construction, in practice and through everyday civic acts, of the norms, institutions, and social relationships that a genuine citizenship would require—regardless of whether the state currently honours them. Constructivist theory provides the framework: these practices are not merely adaptive survival strategies; they are the social construction of a new political reality from below.

Digital technologies—Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, YouTube, and encrypted messaging platforms—have been central to the Anglophone crisis from its inception. The October 2016 strike was coordinated in part through WhatsApp group messaging; the documentation of subsequent atrocities was disseminated globally through Facebook and YouTube; and the mobilisation of diaspora support for both political advocacy and armed groups has occurred primarily through social media networks.

The University of San Francisco's 2021 study of "Virtual Ambazonia" documented how diaspora-based organisations have used social media to construct a virtual political community—in Benedict Anderson's terms, an "imagined community"—that extends Anglophone political identity beyond the geographical boundaries of the Anglophone regions and gives it an institutional form (diaspora governing councils, online "national assemblies", virtual radio stations) independent of any physical territory. This virtual political community is simultaneously a space of genuine civic solidarity—sharing information, coordinating aid, documenting abuses—and a space of harmful content, including disinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence (Repository.USFCA.edu, 2021).

The civic dimensions of this digital mobilisation represent what Soysal (1994) called "post-national citizenship": the exercise of political agency and the assertion of rights claims through non-state, transnational, and digital channels that supplement or replace formal state citizenship frameworks. The Cameroon Database of Atrocities, maintained by researchers at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs, exemplifies this: using open-source digital verification methods to document human rights violations that the Cameroonian state denies, creating a publicly accessible accountability record that formal UN mechanisms have failed to produce. This is civic practice—the production of accountability norms—without and beyond the state.

The constructivist significance of digital citizenship activism lies in its norm-constitutive function. By systematically documenting state violations and publicising them to international audiences, Anglophone digital

activists are not merely reporting events; they are constructing and reinforcing the norm that the Cameroonian state has violated its obligations—a norm that, once established in international discourse, creates pressure for accountability and constrains the state’s room for impunity. This is soft power in Nye’s sense (Nye, 2004), and normative power in the constructivist sense: the capacity to shape the rules of the game through discourse, documentation, and the strategic mobilisation of international norms.

Beyond the digital sphere, Anglophone communities have developed concrete institutional innovations in response to the collapse of state-provided services. Home-based schooling networks—organised by parent committees, church groups, and retired teachers—have operated in areas where state and separatist violence has made formal schooling impossible. Community health initiatives, funded through diaspora remittances and managed by local women’s organisations, have provided basic medical care in villages where government health centres have been abandoned. Local food security networks have organised communal agriculture and food distribution in areas where displacement and ghost towns have disrupted market economies.

These innovations are neither romantic nor sufficient. They are responses to catastrophic institutional failure, and they operate under conditions of extreme physical danger: home-schooling teachers have been threatened by separatists for violating the school boycott, and community health workers have been harassed by security forces suspicious of their networks. But their existence is analytically significant in two respects. First, they demonstrate that Anglophone communities retain—despite years of conflict—the social capital and civic capacity to organise collective responses to shared problems: a foundation of trust and cooperation that any future governance architecture will need to build upon. Second, they represent plastic citizenship in practice: the construction, from below, of the institutional forms that citizenship requires—education, health, security, economic organisation— independent of and in partial substitution for the state.

The International Crisis Group’s 2023 briefing on the Special Status implicitly recognised this when it recommended that any reform framework should build democratic accountability from below—introducing direct universal suffrage for Anglophone regional assembly elections and substantially increasing the financial resources available to regional institutions—rather than reimposing administrative control from Yaoundé (ICG, 2023). The civic institutions that communities have built in the crisis could, in more peaceful conditions, be the building blocks of a genuinely participatory governance framework.

The constructivist framework that organises this article holds that political realities are not natural facts but social constructions: they exist because relevant actors believe in them and act on them, and they can change when those beliefs and practices change. The implication for the Anglophone crisis is both analytically precise and politically hopeful. The Cameroonian state’s claim to sovereign authority over the Anglophone regions is secured by constitutional text or international recognition, yet, it remains challenged, ultimately, by the willingness of Anglophone citizens to participate in its governance structures, comply with its laws, and identify—however minimally—with its political community. That willingness has been systematically eroded by decades of marginalisation and years of violent conflict. The state cannot recover it through military force; coercion can compel external compliance but cannot rebuild internal legitimisation.

The Anglophone civic practices documented in this article—legal contestation, women’s peace advocacy, digital documentation, informal schooling, community health networks—are not merely survival strategies. They are, in constructivist terms, the social construction of an alternative account of what governance in the Anglophone regions should look like: pluralist, bilingual, locally accountable, and grounded in the Common Law and GCE traditions that constitute Anglophone cultural identity. Whether that alternative account is realised

within a reformed Cameroonian state (through genuine federalism or asymmetric decentralisation) or in a separate Anglophone political entity depends on political negotiations that have not yet occurred. But the civic practices themselves—the plastic citizenship of Anglophone communities—constitute the normative raw material from which any legitimate governance arrangement for the region will need to be constructed.

The analysis in both parts of this article converges on a set of institutional imperatives for those seeking to end the Anglophone crisis and repair the relationship between the Cameroonian state and its Anglophone citizens. These are organised under four headings, each connecting the theoretical analysis to specific and verifiable policy recommendations.

Restoring Accountability Through Institutional Reform

Cameroon's Worldwide Governance Indicators confirm what qualitative evidence documents: the institutional infrastructure of accountability—judicial independence, anti-corruption enforcement, press freedom, and civil society protection—has been among the weakest in the world throughout the crisis period. Specifically, Cameroon's Control of Corruption score of approximately -0.70 (20th percentile) and Rule of Law score of -0.57 (24th percentile) reflect a governance environment in which impunity for state violence is systemic rather than exceptional (World Bank, 2024).

Restoring accountability requires: (a) an independent, internationally supported investigation of atrocities committed by all parties since 2016, with prosecutorial follow-up; (b) the reform and civilian oversight of the BIR and other security forces operating in the Anglophone regions; (c) the protection and reinstatement of journalists, civil society leaders, and lawyers detained under counter-terrorism legislation for legitimate civic activity; and (d) the restoration of the Common Law judicial system—including English-language proceedings, adversarial procedures, and the independence of the Anglophone Bar—as a non-negotiable element of any political settlement.

Genuine Decentralisation with Financial Substance

The 2019 Special Status (Law No. 2019/024) has been consistently assessed as inadequate (Republic of Cameroon, 2019)—a “façade of autonomy” in which regional assemblies remain subordinate to presidentially appointed governors and dramatically under-funded relative to statutory commitments (Ndiyun & Mukonza, 2025; ICG, 2023). In 2022, only 7.2% of mandated state revenue transfers to regions were actually made; the figure rose marginally to 8% in 2023 (Peace News Network, 2025). The special status institutions have been populated largely by pro-government figures, further alienating the Anglophone community.

A credible decentralisation framework must provide: direct universal suffrage for Anglophone regional assembly elections, removing the current executive-appointment system; genuine legislative authority in the domains of education and justice, with enforcement mechanisms that do not require Yaoundé's approval; ring-fenced and auditable financial transfers at or above the statutory 15% level; and constitutional protection against dissolution by presidential decree. The ICG's 2023 briefing explicitly recommended robust reform along these lines as a confidence-building measure prerequisite to meaningful peace negotiations.

Inclusive, Internationally Supported Dialogue

The failure of Swiss mediation (September 2022) and Canadian facilitation (2022–2023) reflects two compounding factors: the Cameroonian government's refusal to accept external mediation of what it frames as a

domestic security matter, and the fragmentation of the separatist movement into competing factions with no unified negotiating position. Overcoming both obstacles requires sustained and coordinated international diplomatic engagement.

International support—from the UN Security Council, the African Union Peace and Security Council, the European Union, the United States, and Cameroon’s former colonial powers—is necessary to create the political conditions for dialogue. France’s historical reluctance to apply pressure on the Biya government through the *Françafrique* relationship must be confronted directly; the United Kingdom’s particular moral responsibility as the former colonial power of Southern Cameroons must be exercised more actively. The ICG’s 2024 forward-looking analysis flagged AU involvement as a specific variable to watch—a potential new resource for conflict resolution if the AU’s traditional non-interference posture can be qualified by its own Responsibility to Protect commitments.

Education Emergency as Civic Reconstruction

The education emergency in the Anglophone regions—2,245 non-functional schools, 700,000 children out of education, a multi-year school boycott enforced by violence from both sides—is simultaneously a humanitarian catastrophe and a civic crisis. Education is not only an individual right; it is the primary institutional mechanism through which citizenship norms, civic identity, and the capacity for democratic participation are transmitted across generations. A generation of Anglophone children deprived of education is a generation from which the civic capacity for post-conflict reconstruction—already fragile in the Anglophone regions—will be absent.

A “back to school” initiative—negotiated through a ceasefire agreement, funded by international donors, implemented through community-based institutions rather than state-military mechanisms, and designed to protect both the GCE educational tradition and the physical safety of teachers and students—is both a humanitarian and a political imperative. The Women’s Task Force and community parent networks that have maintained informal schooling during the conflict should be the implementation partners: they have the trust of communities, the civic infrastructure, and the demonstrated capacity for grassroots governance that top-down state restoration cannot replicate.

Conclusion

The Cameroonian Anglophone crisis is not merely a secessionist insurgency or a counter-terrorism challenge. It is, as this article has argued through a constructivist analytical framework, a fundamental crisis of the social fact of sovereignty and the lived experience of citizenship. It reveals, in microcosm, the core contradiction of the postcolonial African state: the gap between the formal legal categories of citizenship and sovereign authority, imported from European constitutional traditions and hardened by colonial cartography, and the social realities of culturally plural, historically complex, and politically contested communities that those categories were never designed to represent.

Part I demonstrated that Cameroon’s domestic sovereignty in the Anglophone regions has been functionally eroded through a confluence of state violence that has destroyed legitimacy, parallel governance structures that have filled the resulting vacuum, and governance indicators that place the country in the bottom quintile globally on every dimension relevant to state-citizen relations. Drawing on Krasner’s taxonomy of contested sovereignty and the social contract tradition, it showed that the Cameroonian state’s insistence on its formal sovereignty is a form of organised hypocrisy—internationally maintained but domestically evacuated.

Part II demonstrated that Anglophone communities have responded to this legitimacy crisis not with passive acceptance but with what this article calls “plastic citizenship”—adaptive, creative, and multiply-situated civic practices that construct, from below, the governance norms and institutions that formal citizenship requires but the state fails to provide. Drawing on Ong’s flexible citizenship framework and constructivist theory, it showed that the politicisation of Anglophone identity, the digital and diasporic civic activism, and the community governance innovations of the crisis period are not merely survival strategies but the social construction of an alternative account of what legitimate governance in the Anglophone regions should mean.

The dialectical tension that organises this analysis—between the preservation of an outdated citizenship model and the construction of a new one with a renewed social contract, to use the language of the article’s abstract—is not resolved by the analysis. It remains the live political question at the heart of the Anglophone crisis. Its resolution requires political will, institutional creativity, and international engagement that have thus far been insufficient to the scale of the challenge. But the framework proposed here—constructivist, attentive to the agency of citizens and not only the authority of states, sensitive to the normative dimensions of governance as well as its coercive capacities—suggests that the resolution lies not in military victory by either side but in the renegotiation of the social contract: a genuine reimagination of what it means to be sovereign and what it means to be a citizen in Africa’s linguistically plural, postcolonially complex, and politically creative states.

The crisis in the Anglophone regions is, ultimately, not just a challenge to Cameroonian authority. It is a broader laboratory—painful, costly, and still unresolved—for the reimagination of sovereignty and citizenship that the entire African continent requires.

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