



Liberal Democracy and Political Violence in Cameroon: The Crisis of the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon

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Abstract: This paper critically examines Cameroon's democratization trajectory since the early 1990s through the analytical lens of Democratic Peace Theory (DPT). While DPT posits that democracies foster peace through norms of negotiation, accountability, and institutional constraints, Cameroon's experience reveals a stark divergence from these expectations. Despite adopting multiparty politics and liberal reforms under domestic and international pressure, the country has evolved into a hybrid democratic authoritarian system marked by electoral manipulation, entrenched elite dominance, and the erosion of civil liberties. The 2016 Anglophone crisis serves as a critical case illustrating how democratic institutions have been instrumentalized to legitimize coercion rather than promote peaceful dispute resolution. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2025—including 50 interviews, seven focus group discussions, and documentary analysis—the study demonstrates that the Biya regime's repressive response to Anglophone grievances has deepened political fragility, institutionalized state violence, and exacerbated social divisions. The findings challenge DPT's applicability in hybrid regimes and propose a Contextualized Democratic Peace Model (CDPM) that integrates institutional resilience, socioeconomic equity, and normative adaptation as prerequisites for intrastate peace in African democracies.

Keywords: liberal democracy, Anglophone crisis, Cameroon, democratic peace theory, hybrid regimes, political violence.

INTRODUCTION

Following the end of the Cold War, African states widely embraced liberal multiparty democracy, driven by the belief that democratic governance would enhance political freedom, institutional accountability, and sustainable development. Liberal theorists argue that democracy fosters peace by promoting transparency, checks and balances, human rights, and broad political participation (Dahl, 1971, 1998; Norris, 2011). These principles underpin Democratic Peace Theory (Russett et al., 1995), which posits that democracies rarely engage in violent conflict due to shared norms of negotiation and institutional constraints on executive power.

Cameroon adopted multiparty politics and structural economic reforms in the early 1990s, raising expectations for democratic consolidation. However, these reforms produced mixed outcomes. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) deepened poverty, while multiparty politics became mired in electoral fraud, political violence, and authoritarian resurgence. The Anglophone crisis that erupted in 2016 reflects the cumulative effects of these tensions.

This paper argues that Cameroon's liberalization process has reinforced authoritarian rule rather than fostered democratic peace. The Biya regime has relied on coercive and militarized responses to Anglophone grievances, undermining democratic norms and escalating conflict. The analysis challenges DPT's assumptions by demonstrating how hybrid regimes may weaponize democratic institutions to legitimize repression rather than constrain it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2016 Anglophone Crisis at a Glance

The Anglophone problem in Cameroon is rooted in the country's political history, particularly the flawed reunification process that centralized power in the hands of Francophone elites (Atanga, 2011). Anglophones have long felt politically marginalized, economically excluded, and culturally suppressed (Konings, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2017). These grievances resurfaced in 2016 when Anglophone lawyers and teachers launched peaceful protests demanding respect for the common law system and English-language education.

As the document notes, *"the lawyers and teachers' peaceful demonstrations were met with brutal and repressive responses from the government."* Security forces arrested activists, shut down the internet for 93 days, and intensified military operations. These actions catalyzed widespread mobilization, diaspora activism, and the emergence of armed separatist groups demanding federalism or secession (Amnesty International, 2018a). The crisis escalated into violent confrontations, mass displacement, kidnappings, and the burning of villages (Ekah, 2020; Lunn & Brooke-Holland, 2019). The government's denial of the Anglophone problem, failed national dialogue, and exclusionary conflict management approaches further entrenched separatist demands for an independent state, "Ambazonia."

Democratization and Violence in the Anglophone Regions

Cameroon's democratization has produced a hybrid regime where democratic institutions mask entrenched authoritarian control. SAP-induced socioeconomic decline, electoral malpractice, and repression have undermined democratic consolidation. As your document states, *"the Cameroon state has instead been the key driver of sporadic violence witnessed in the regions."* State violence—including arbitrary arrests, torture, village burnings, and military abuses—has intensified separatist resistance and eroded state legitimacy (Amnesty International, 2018b; BBC, 2018). Elite rent-seeking, patrimonial governance, and the "politics of the belly" (Bayart, 1989) have further entrenched violence as a political instrument. The Anglophone crisis thus exposes the limits of liberal democracy in Cameroon, where democratic institutions serve elite interests rather than citizen welfare.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Democratic Peace Theory and the African Context

Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) posits that democracies rarely engage in violent conflict due to shared norms of negotiation and institutional constraints (Doyle, 1983, 1986; Russett

et al., 1998). Its normative dimension emphasizes tolerance and compromise, while its institutional dimension highlights accountability and checks on executive power (Reiter & Stam, 2002).

However, DPT faces significant critiques. Scholars highlight its Eurocentric assumptions, oversimplified democracy-autocracy dichotomy, and limited applicability to hybrid regimes (Hegre, 2014; Rocha Menocal et al., 2008). Democracies may still engage in covert interventions, sanctions, and proxy conflicts (Desch, 2002).

African democratization presents a complex testing ground for DPT. Multiparty systems often coexist with weak institutions, elite dominance, and authoritarian legacies (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Cheeseman, 2015). SAPs weakened state capacity and exacerbated inequality (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Many African states exhibit illiberal or competitive authoritarian features (Zakaria, 1997; Levitsky & Way, 2010), undermining DPT's assumptions.

Contextualized Democratic Peace Model (CDPM)

To address these limitations, this paper proposes the Contextualized Democratic Peace Model (CDPM), which reinterprets DPT through three interlinked dimensions:

1. **Institutional Resilience** Peace requires robust judicial independence, credible checks and balances, and participatory local governance (Chlouba, 2024).
2. **Socioeconomic Equity** Sustainable peace depends on distributive justice and inclusive development (Mkandawire, 2021).
3. **Normative Adaptation** Indigenous dispute-resolution mechanisms must complement democratic norms (Okoro et al., 2025).

CDPM shifts DPT's focus from interstate peace to intrastate stability, recognizing Africa's hybrid political realities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative single-case interpretivist design to examine Cameroon's democratization trajectory and the Anglophone crisis. As the document states, *"this design enables an in-depth exploration of how democratic norms and institutions operate within one national context that simultaneously exhibits hybrid political features and internal conflict."* An interpretivist approach prioritizes actors' lived experiences and perceptions of state authority (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Case Selection and Rationale

Cameroon is selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for testing DPT's limits in hybrid regimes. Four embedded subunits—Buea, Bamenda, Douala, and Yaoundé—capture geographic and institutional diversity. This multi-site design enhances internal validity and analytical generalizability.

Data Collection

Data collection integrated secondary sources and primary fieldwork conducted between October 2023 and June 2025. Fifty semi-structured interviews and seven focus group discussions were conducted across four cities. Documentary analysis included government statements, constitutional amendments, NGO reports, and media sources.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization. Triangulation and member checking enhanced credibility. Reflexive memoing mitigated researcher bias.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12. An abductive strategy combined inductive coding with theory-driven categories aligned with DPT's normative and institutional dimensions (Dafoe, 2011; Hegre, 2014).

Analytical Framework

A two-tiered framework guided interpretation:

1. **Normative Dimension** Examined how democratic norms—tolerance, legitimacy, minority rights—were expressed or undermined.
2. **Institutional Dimension** Assessed how elections, judicial processes, and decentralization mitigated or escalated conflict.

This enabled systematic comparison between DPT's expectations and Cameroon's empirical realities.

DISCUSSION

Cameroon illustrates the paradoxes of liberal democracy in postcolonial African states. Liberal reforms intended to promote openness and peace have instead enabled authoritarian entrenchment. Elections occur regularly but lack transparency; judicial independence exists in form but not in substance (Takougang & Amin, 2018).

The Anglophone crisis reveals the fragility of top-down democratization. Peaceful protests escalated into violent conflict following the regime's heavy-handed response. Rather than engaging in dialogue, the government deployed elite military units, shuttered schools, and detained journalists (Dkamela & Nguiffo, 2022). These tactics deepened grievances and eroded trust.

Cameroon challenges DPT's universalist assumptions. DPT presupposes substantive democracy, yet Cameroon aligns with Zakaria's (1997) illiberal democracy. Democratic institutions serve elite dominance rather than citizen empowerment. Partial democratization without strong institutions increases the likelihood of internal conflict (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995).

Normative democratic values—freedom of speech, minority rights, equality before the law—have eroded. Democratic institutions have become tools of repression (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Elite agency plays a central role: Biya’s regime strategically deploys democratic mechanisms to maintain control while relying on coercion to suppress dissent (Gilley, 2009).

Cameroon’s trajectory parallels other African hybrid regimes, including Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. These patterns suggest that DPT’s “zone of peace” applies primarily to consolidated democracies with strong institutional and cultural foundations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Genuine and Inclusive Dialogue:** Dialogue must include all stakeholder-armed groups, jailed leaders, diaspora, civil society, political parties, and affected communities. Neutral venues and international mediation (AU, UN, Britain, France, Germany, USA) are essential.
2. **Return to a Two-State Federation:** Revisiting the 1961 plebiscite and restoring federalism would reduce over-centralization, empower local governance, and address historical grievances.
3. **Reformed Decentralization Framework:** Asymmetric federalism should grant Anglophone regions legislative and administrative autonomy over education, judicial affairs, and resource governance (Fombad, 2019).
4. **Transitional Justice Mechanisms:** Truth commissions, reparations, and independent investigations must address abuses by both state and separatist actors (Cho & Agbor, 2022).
5. **Context-Specific DDR Programs:** DDR must be locally embedded, adequately funded, and preceded by ceasefire guarantees. Reintegration should include psychosocial support and community engagement (Özerdem, 2022).
6. **Security Sector Reform:** Police, army, gendarmerie, and BIR require training in civilian protection, human rights, and nonviolent crowd management.
7. **Continuous Regional Monitoring:** AU and ECCAS must transition from passive observers to active mediators and compliance enforcers (Okereke, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This paper examined Cameroon’s democratization trajectory and the Anglophone crisis through the lens of Democratic Peace Theory (DPT). Cameroon’s experience reveals critical limitations in applying DPT to hybrid regimes. Liberal reforms have enabled authoritarian entrenchment rather than democratic consolidation. The Anglophone crisis illustrates how democratic institutions can be instrumentalized to legitimize coercion, contradicting DPT’s assumptions. Sustainable peace requires transitioning from pseudo-democracy to substantive democracy. This includes building credible institutions, decentralizing power, strengthening judicial independence, and embracing transitional justice. Regional and international actors must play a more active role in facilitating genuine dialogue and pressuring the regime toward reform. Without systemic transformation, Cameroon risks

becoming a cautionary example of how liberal democratic frameworks can be co-opted to reinforce authoritarian violence rather than prevent it.

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