

# ABANDONED TO ITS FATE

English-speakers are being slaughtered by the Cameroonian government yet the UK - embarrassed by its colonial past - refuses to engage. Rebecca Tinsley reports

It is hardly controversial to suggest the European powers exploited their colonies, leaving a toxic vapour trail. The impact of Britain's divide and rule policies – relying on one favoured tribal elite to impose British hegemony – persists most blatantly in Kenya and Nigeria, with dismal results. In addition, our departure often left chaos, and in the case of India in 1947, millions of people dead or displaced.

Less discussed is the need for Britain to re-engage when the citizens of a former colony ask the UK to put diplomatic pressure on their current corrupt and violent masters.

The problems facing the voiceless, powerless masses in parts of the developing world are often a consequence of our bungled withdrawal at independence. We owe it to these citizens to champion their causes, when invited to.

It may provoke snide laughter among cynics, but in many parts of the world, Britain is still held up as an inspiring example, albeit a flawed one, of responsive parliamentary democracy, free speech, human rights, judicial independence, predictable law and impartial bureaucracy.

To quote a former Kenyan foreign minister, in conversation with your correspondent in 2005: "Britain is our mother, like it or not, and we still have the right to ask for your moral support when we try to emulate your best behaviour."

It is puzzling and hurtful to some African citizens when Britain behaves as if the past was wholly negative and so shameful we prefer to pretend it never happened, denying the historical and cultural links that have left their trace in every village.

## BRUTAL, KLEPTOMANIAC RULERS

Wracked with guilt, and preferring not to acknowledge our complicated common story, we throw aid at brutal, kleptomaniac rulers. African critics point out we even lack the interest to ensure our money reaches the ostensible beneficiary projects.

The truth about our past is surely more nuanced, as in any family, where affection coexists with memories of betrayal and cruelty. A good portion of the best African civil society leaders, professionals and faith leaders were schooled in British-run village classrooms, worshipped at British churches, and were healed by British-trained medical professionals in British-funded bush clinics.

When Africans see how France carefully cultivates its economic, military, social and political ties with its former colonies, they wonder why the British simple hand over aid, forever defining the relationship as manipulative beggar and guilty donor.

A case in point is Cameroon, a small central African nation teetering on the brink of Rwanda-like conflict. Instead of acknowledging our colonial carelessness by making amends, the British government denies it has any responsibility for the legacy of human rights abuses. "Nothing to do with us, guv," is the tone of ministerial answers to questions tabled by Liberal Democrat peers recently.

Your correspondent travelled not to Cameroon but to Bournemouth to gain an insight into just how disingenuous these ministerial responses are. In a chilly church hall, the Cameroonian diaspora gathered to welcome a visiting Roman Catholic African bishop. As women in colourful headscarves distributed trays of greasy snacks, and hyperactive toddlers weaved between the forest of adult legs, a group of Cameroonian men discussed the escalating violence in their country of birth.

This may sound familiar to Liberator readers, but the problem began when the British government agreed to present voters with a binary choice in a UN-backed referendum.

Up until 1960, there were two Cameroons: the larger territory was administered by the French, using the French legal and educational systems and language. In the extreme west and south of the region, the British were in charge. At their schools, students spoke English and studied for O and A Levels, and the courts were run according to English common law.

In 1961, a referendum asked the inhabitants of British Cameroon if they wanted to join neighbouring Nigeria or French-speaking Cameroon. The third choice – establishing an independent, English-speaking country – was not offered. By default, the English-speaking Cameroonians found they were a minority (about 10%) in the new nation. A constitution guaranteeing equal rights was soon watered down and disregarded, and the Francophone majority grabbed the positions of power in government (only one in 36 ministers is Anglophone) and the military. In the years since independence, the British government stood by, mute, as the rights of its former wards of guardianship were eroded.

In 2016, the status of the Anglophone minority deteriorated further when French-speaking judges were appointed to courts in the English-speaking south and west. The judges refused to conduct hearings in English, and new laws were published only in French. French-speaking teachers were parachuted into majority English-speaking schools where they refused to teach in English. This fomented a civil society movement that has become increasingly polarised and violent, as the Francophone regime of President Paul Biya (in power since 1982) denies they have grievances. Faith leaders have tried to chart a

moderate, conciliatory path, but have been ignored by the government, and sidelined by increasingly militant pro-independence activists.

For more than a year, Anglophone lawyers and teachers have been on strike. Shops and businesses close weekly in so-called Ghost Town protests, although there are claims that secessionist forces intimidate people to stand in solidarity with them. The Francophone authorities have responded with heavy-handed tactics: unplugging the internet, firing on unarmed civilians from helicopters, and shooting people as they emerge from church. According to the International Crisis Group, more than 40 have been killed, hundreds have been arrested, and many are missing. On 5 January, the secessionists' president and eight colleagues were abducted by Cameroonian military forces while they met in the Nigerian capital, Abuja. This follows unauthorised incursions into Nigeria by Cameroonian forces, chasing secessionists who have fled over the border.

In an atmosphere described as "fearful," thousands have gone to Nigeria, blaming constant harassment by the Cameroonian military, and the UN is preparing for many more to arrive as the violence increases.

The Cameroonian authorities claim to have sent tanks and heavily armed soldiers into the Anglophone border area on 29 December to protect civilians from secessionist militants, but refugees tell a different story: young men and boys dragged from their homes by soldiers who beat them, steal possessions and set fire to homes. Villages of 6,000 people are reported to have only 50 inhabitants left. Even the normally supine UN Human Rights Council condemned the excessive use for force by Cameroonian police, and the regime's reluctance to engage in genuine dialogue.

Militant Anglophones have hit back, targeting members of the security forces with assassinations and bombings, denouncing those moderate Anglophones pushing for a more federal, decentralised system that avoids secession. But in the absence of a unified Anglophone position, President Biya survives because of his usefulness to the international community.

More than 2,000 Cameroonian troops have been killed so far, battling Boko Haram (the Nigerian terrorists inspired by ISIS). Cameroon also hosts 320,000 refugees who have fled the chaos caused by militants in the Central African Republic and Nigeria. As with Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania and Rwanda, Africans are fighting the West's wars supplying peacekeepers to the UN missions we create and pay for (yet will not send our soldiers to join). Not surprisingly, Biya feels inoculated against international censure.

Back in Bournemouth, an impassioned member of the diaspora told your correspondent without a trace of irony, "We Anglophone Cameroonians must defend our Anglo-Saxon values." His friends nodded, equally emphatic about their cultural ties to a country that doesn't even know they exist, but for their football team. They want the British government to defend the English-speaking minority, pushing Biya to enforce the various conventions and bills of rights to which his regime is a signatory. They fear the violence will escalate, and in the absence of international concern, the regime will crack down on civil society even more viciously.

British diplomatic re-engagement has amounted to a Foreign Office appeal to all sides to refrain from violence and agree to dialogue. In other words, the usual moral equivalence bordering on appeasement. In what respect is an unarmed and oppressed minority equally responsible for the current violence as the soldiers shooting them from helicopters?

What puzzles the Anglophone Cameroonians is the contrast between British disinterest and France's embrace of its former colonies. The French never went away: they continue to pull strings, controlling politics, the military and the economy in the places they consider theirs, usually to France's benefit.

As if to compensate for their humiliation in World War Two, they have carefully tended their African back yard, creating a new empire in all but name. To quote a French political commentator: "France is a large hen followed by a docile brood of little black chicks. The casual observer imagining that money is the cement of the relationship would have the wrong impression. The cement is language and culture."

## EMBEDDED FRENCH

From Mitterrand's active support for the *genocidaires* in Rwanda, to Hollande's successful military interventions in West Africa, the French are embedded. (In Chad, your correspondent found a hotel filled with shaven-headed, muscle-bound, cube-shaped French foreign legion officers on r&r – and that was just the female soldiers - taking a break from the fight against Islamist terrorists). Cameroon's offshore oil may be on the Anglophone coast, but the companies running the rigs are all French.

Paradoxically, the British Foreign Office typically underestimates its impact in its former colonies, while vastly overestimating its influence in the USA (where almost no one has heard of the so-called special relationship, a persisting UK delusion).

It could be argued that Cameroon doesn't matter, although as the situation deteriorates there will be more Anglophone Cameroonians seeking asylum in the UK, and the UK will have to contribute to the costs of UN refugee camps across the border in Nigeria.

However, there is a principle at stake in Cameroon: does the UK simply pretend there is no special relationship with former colonial citizens who are actively asking for its help? As we draw back into fortress Britain, do we imagine the Chinese, Russians and Turks are not already filling the gap we and the Americans have left in the developing world? Does even the most Trotskyist Corbynite believe our Anglo-Saxon values are less worthy than those of Putin, Xi and Erdogan? To quote the Kenyan politician, it is time for the UK to turn the page and start a new chapter with its African family.

---

Rebecca Tinsley is the founder of Waging Peace. [www.WagingPeace.info](http://www.WagingPeace.info)