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## **Questioning Separatism in a Context of Democratic Development: The Polisario and the Ambazonian Movement in the Face of Today's New Geopolitical Challenges**

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*Abstract*

Several African states are currently being rocked by separatist or autonomist movements seeking to create independent micro-states within recognised sovereign states. These include the Movement for self-determination of Kabylie (MAK) in Algeria, the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda in Angola, the Ogaden National Liberation Front or the Tigray Liberation Movement in Ethiopia, the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (NLMA) in Mali, the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance in Senegal and so on. While some of these movements date back to the post-independence era, others are more recent, albeit fuelled by distant causes. An example of this is Morocco, a North African country and a founding member of the Arab Maghreb Union, which faces separatism and regular harassment from Polisario, a movement that has been advocating the creation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic since 1976. A similar case study is English-speaking Cameroon, where various armed groups are calling for the creation of Ambazonia. While it is true that separatism is partly justified by the various frustrations of a population, it is also true that it represents a major risk to the stability of states. Given the current context and the issues at stake, it is almost impossible to give separatism any support. Repeated violations of human rights (rape, sexual abuse, looting, etc.), large-scale atrocities, massive destruction, violence, etc. are comparable to the methods of terrorists, and constitute a serious threat to sub-regional, regional and international peace and stability. This work is the result of the analysis of the archival, documentary and oral data collected and supplemented by neutral direct observation in the field. At the end of this reflection, four observations can be made about the Polisario and the independent movement of Ambazonia: The Polisario and the independent movement of Ambazonia have the same objective (independence); the same method of recruiting fighters (forced or voluntary recruitment among unemployed young people); the same modus operandi (use of violence), and the same approach (seeking external support to better influence geopolitical issues).

**Keywords:** Separatism, violence, peace, Morocco, Cameroon.

## Introduction

Two separatist movements have been among the most active in demanding independence and using arbitrary (and excessive) violence in Africa in recent years – the Polisario (Morocco) and the Ambazonian movement (Cameroon). The Polisario movement began as a student movement on May 10, 1973 and later evolved into a political organisation, and finally transformed into an armed secessionist. Currently, the movement is now taking advantage of the freedom offered by social media to propagate its cause. The same goes for the Ambazonian movement in Cameroon, which was born out of historical frustrations and the inadequacies of the democratic process set in motion. The crisis was linked to the return to democracy in 1990, and has transformed into a violent movement since 2016, claiming to be a hypothetical Republic of Ambazonia (Koungou, 2018, pp.101-106). While Polisario enjoys logistical support from Algeria's immediate vicinity, according to the Cameroon government, the Ambazonian movement received early financial support from the Anglophone diaspora based in Europe and America.

Although the Polisario and the Ambazonian movement were born out of two different contexts, both movements sought external support to bolster their positions, influence the issues at stake and exert their power particularly within Africa and international organisations. This article analyses the motivations, workings and ambitions of each of these separatist movements in order to establish their points of convergence and divergence. What similarities and differences can be identified in the way the Polisario and the Ambazonian movement were organised, operated and how both movements project themselves in a complex geopolitical context?

Beyond the generalities on separatism (Gonzales, 2023; Lamine, 2024; Ghali, 2024), few scientific productions have been devoted to the Polisario (Gomez & Omet, 2009) and the Ambazonian movement (Tchinda, 2017; Koungou, 2018, Keutcheu, 2021; Koungou, 2022). At the heart of these wars and conflict movement, this paper focuses on the theory of securitisation as seen through the works of recognised authors (Bigo, 2002; Barry & Waever, 2003; Huysmans, 2006; Balzacq, 2018). For them, security is played out outside or beyond normal political space. Similarly, the process of securitisation is first and foremost an act of discourse before becoming an action. Thus, in securitisation, the act of language presents an issue as an existential security threat to collective/national identity, society and the state (Bourbeau, 2013, p.135). Drawing on documentary data and those collected in the field, this work favours a socio-historical approach and is organised into three parts. The first part deals with the birth and

motivations of separatism in Morocco and Cameroon. The second part presents the profile and modes of action of the Polisario and Ambazonian movements, while the last part analyses the evolution of separatism in the light of peace and security issues in Africa.

## **Origin and Ideology of Separatist Movements: The Polisario and the Ambazonian Movement**

Defined as "an action by which a political system distinct from the political system of the state appropriates, controls and manages a portion of state territory" (Aquarone, 1987, p.9). Separatism is almost always condemned. This condemnation of separatism in all its forms by governments is almost unanimous, given its traumatic experience. Indeed, separatism or secessionism carried out by armed movements using violence, is always seen as an attack on a country's territorial integrity, and it is often repressed by governments. This is the case for the Polisario movement, which has been calling for the creation of a state in the Sahara (southern Morocco) since 1976. In English-speaking Cameroon, secessionism, which has been more strongly expressed since November 2016, is driven by a multitude of armed groups in the country's English-speaking regions (North-West and South-West).

### *Le Polisario or the separatist interface in Moroccan Sahara*

The Polisario Front or Polisario, a shortened form of the Spanish *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro*, which means "Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia El Hamra and the Rio de Oro" was initially a student movement launched in the Sahara on May 10, 1973 but later became a political and armed movement. The Polisario is the transformation of the Sahara Liberation Movement (MLS) inspired by the Cuban revolutionary ideas of Ernesto Che Guevara. It was made up of around fifty militants (Gomez, 2016, p.81) and fought against the Spanish occupiers. Its founder and leader was Mohamed Sidi Brahim Bassiri, a young Sahrawi who had studied in Cairo and Damascus and made contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Kabbaj, 2016, p.257). After he disappeared following his arrest by the Spanish colonisers, some Saharawi students at Moroccan universities opted for a new leader-

El Ouali Mustapha Sayed,<sup>2</sup> a young law student in Rabat of Sahrawi origin (Chegraoui & Jallal, 2020, p.7). These developments took place against a backdrop of psychosis and East-West tension. It was strongly marked by the fading figurehead of Francisco Franco Bahamonde, an authoritarian and charismatic advocate of the socialist theses of the Axis powers (Benmessaoud Tredano, 2010, p.188). The anthropomorphism of Franco's power and his socialist leanings had made him a preoccupation of both the democratic governments of Western Europe and international public opinion since 1939.

At the same time, the then Algerian president, Houari Boumediene, was determined to find a strategic outlet for the Dar Jbilet iron, which would be unprofitable if it had to be transported north of the country to the Mediterranean. The Moroccan port of Tarfaya was seen as a good alternative in terms of the cost of transport to the Atlantic port. After several meetings, a joint Moroccan-Algerian company was set up to meet this vital Algerian need. It was agreed that the port of Tarfaya would be redeveloped, and that a road and rail link would be built between Dar Jbilet and Tarfaya. Suspicious of an undisclosed dispute settlement agreement between Morocco and Mauritania, and of a possible agreement between Morocco and Spain, Algeria, through its Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika, was concerned to the point of expressing fear that Morocco would contest the border line and lay claim to its territories. Furthermore, the idea of the "Green March" was whispered at a time when Franco's demise seemed inevitable. For Algeria, the Moroccan-Algerian social project ran the risk of being nullified by the Moroccan side. As a result, Morocco had gradually acquired a privileged status as a mediator in the Middle East, which was symbolically likely to deflect Algeria's insidious claims in the sub-region and in the Moroccan Sahara. To get closer to the candle, Houari Boumediene reactivated the "Guevara doctrine in the Sahara" by commissioning Kasdi Merbah<sup>3</sup> to make contact with El Ouali Mustapha Sayed. Later, Yuri Andropov, the all-powerful director of the KGB and future leader of the Soviet Union, became involved. It was at Andropov's instigation that Kasdi Merbah approached El Ouali Mustapha Sayed with a view to proclaiming an imaginary republic without delay. On February 25, 1976, Grigori Andriovitch, a set decorator from the Russian state company "Mosfilm", was sent to the Sahara to prepare the scenography

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<sup>2</sup> Born in 1948 in Bir Lehlou (a town in northeastern Moroccan Sahara, 236 kilometres from Es-Semara and a few kilometres from the Mauritanian village of Ain Ben Tili), he died on June 9, 1976 in Nouakchott.

<sup>3</sup> Kasdi Merbah, whose real name was Abdellah Khalef, was born on April 16, 1938 in Fez, Morocco, and was assassinated on August 21, 1993 in Algiers. He was the shadow man of the Boumediene for years and an Algerian military and statesman. He was head of intelligence for the General Staff and Military Security under Boumediene.

for a declaration of independence. Thus, was born the so-called SADR, an imaginary republic with no attributes of sovereignty (Saint-Prot, De Cara & Boutin, 2016, p.18). However, it should be pointed out that this entity was officially admitted as a member of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1984, which forced the Kingdom of Morocco to leave the OAU (Morocco rejoined the African Union on 31st January 2017).<sup>4</sup> These ties in with the thesis developed by Houari Boumediene, President of the Algerian Republic (1965-1978) when he declared that he would make the Sahara the pebble in Morocco's shoe (Abécassis, Dirèche & Aouad, 2012, p.152). In contrast to the Polisario movement, the Ambazonian movement has experienced a different trajectory but has similar practices.

### *The Ambazonian movement or the recycling of buried frustration*

The Ambazonie separatist movement was an offshoot of a third front that emerged from the plebiscite of February 11-12, 1961. Cameroon has been a German protectorate since the German-Douala treaty of July 14, 1884. It was divided into two possessions – French (425,000 square km) and English (split into two parts: Southern British Cameroon 41,000 square km and Northern British Cameroon with 44,000 km<sup>2</sup>) on March 4, 1916 (Oloa, 2007, p.34). Thereafter, there were two Camerouns with distinct administrative systems: *Direct Rule* for the French part of Cameroon and *Indirect Rule* for the English part. Furthermore, the territory was placed under mandate by the League of Nations (SDN), the London Act of August 12, 1922, then under UN trusteeship through the Act of December 13, 1946 (Nguiffo, 2007, p.23). Separated from each other, the two parts of Cameroon evolved until the early 1960s (Tamekamta, 2016, p. 236).

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<sup>4</sup> The dispute over the Moroccan Sahara was brought before the OAU Council of Ministers by the OAU Committee in Maputo in 1976, under pressure from Algeria and Libya. On several occasions, the OAU Council of Ministers proved to be ineffective, claiming to be attached to the position of the various previous UN Resolutions. Between 1976 and 1982, several conferences of Heads of State were held without being able to reach conclusions accepted by the parties. For more details, read : E. Méric, « Le conflit algéro-marocain », *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 15, no4, 1965 ; P. Vellas, « La diplomatie marocaine dans l'affaire du Sahara occidental », *Politique étrangère*, n° 4, 1978, pp.417-428 ; M. de Froberville, *Sahara occidental, la confiance perdue. L'impartialité de l'O.N.U. à l'épreuve*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996 ; M. Bennouna, « L'admission d'un nouveau membre à l'Organisation de l'unité africaine », *Annuaire français de droit international*, volume 26, 1980, pp.193-198 ; C. Rucz, « Un référendum au Sahara occidental? », *Annuaire français de droit international*, Volume 40, 1994; O. Vergniot, « La question du Sahara occidental : autodétermination et enjeux référendaires (1956-1989) », *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, Tome XXVIII, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1989; A. Benmessaoud Tredano, *La question du Sahara: Histoire d'une décolonisation pas comme les autres. Repères historiques, décolonisation et autonomie*, Rabat, Confluences, 2010 ; M. T. Kabbaj, *L'affaire du Sahara occidental*, Tome 2, Rabat, Imprimerie Bidaoui, 2016 ; Ch. Saint-Prot, J.-Y. de Cara and Ch. Boutin, *Sahara marocain : le dossier d'un conflit artificiel*, Rabat, Éditions Marsam, 2016.

French Cameroon became independent on January 1st<sup>1</sup>, 1960, while English Cameroon became independent on October 1, 1961 following the plebiscite of February 11 and 12, 1961. During this UN-sponsored plebiscite, the populations of Southern British Cameroon and Northern British Cameroon were asked to vote either for annexation to Nigeria or for union with the already independent French Cameroon. A small number of voters expressed a desire to join neither Nigeria nor French Cameroon. The latter voted in favour of the constitution of a separate English-speaking state which marked the beginning of separatist aspirations in Cameroon. From that moment on, a rivalry between the French-speaking and English-speaking communities started. This rivalry was underpinned by political transactions and protests for independence in three phases: the claim to a supposed negation of Anglophone identity (1961-1972); the claim to access administrative and economic resources (1972-1989) and the claim to an "Anglophone" cultural and political identity (1990-2017) (Tamekamta, 2021, pp.101-127). As a result of the political and trade union liberalisation of the early 1990s, numerous associations and pressure groups had been created in the country's English-speaking regions. The more aggressive Free West Cameroon Movement (FWCM) and Fon Gorji Dinka's Ambazonia Movement advocated secession. The more moderate Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM), now the All-Anglophone Conference (AAC), called for a return to the federal state. In reality, these were two alternative tendencies that clashed at regular intervals. The first, a minimalist, called for a return to the original federalism. The second, a maximalist trend otherwise known as "Option Zero" called for secession. Meeting in Buea on February 09, 1994, the members of CAM's national executive committee definitively amended the Buea Peace Initiative (BPI),<sup>5</sup> a document which was to be submitted at the second Anglophone Conference (AAC II) (Nkoum-Me-Ntsey, 1996, p.87), held from April 29 to May 02, 1994 in Bamenda (Gam Nwi, 2004, p.200).

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<sup>5</sup> The Buea Peace Initiative proposed to negotiate with the Republic of Cameroon a timetable for the withdrawal of civil servants from Southern Cameroons to French-speaking areas and vice versa. It also suggested the withdrawal of the Republic of Cameroon's armed forces from Southern Cameroons territory and the repatriation of Southern Cameroons citizens serving in the Republic of Cameroon's armed forces. In addition, the "Exodus to Southern Cameroons" operation was set up to repatriate all Anglophones in Southern Cameroons as quickly as possible. This last act was symbolically materialised in June 1995 when John Ngu Foncha, originally from English-speaking Western Cameroon, crossed the bridge over the Mounjo on foot. He was the founder of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP), Prime Minister of Western Cameroon and Vice-President of the United Republic of Cameroon from 1961 to 1970, signatory of the Fouban Agreement on the Reunification of the two parts of the country and Salomon Tandeng Muna (politician from Western Cameroon, former Prime Minister, former Vice-President of the United Republic of Cameroon from 1970 to 1972 and the President of the National Assembly of Cameroon until his death in 1991). Read *The Star Headlines*, Vol.4, n° 23, Friday, July 7, 1995. pp 19-20; *Le Messenger*, n° 445, July 3, 1995. p.4.

Anglophone separatism in Cameroon, inspired by the Anglophone crisis, was born out of the corporatist demands (of lawyers and teachers) of Anglophones in November 2016. It is, in fact, the outcome of the prolongation of a long-revealed dissatisfaction that had been simmering for long decades under the maintenance of the Anglophone political elite. Political governance, marked by clientelism and mediocrity is at the heart of this social situation, which has developed into political demands. Four categories of ideologically radical actors have been maintaining this identity and political crisis for the past three years. They are the supporters of the status quo, embodied by the holders of political power in Yaoundé (who insist on legitimate repression); the anglo-negationists (who reject an alleged anglophone identity); the federalists (anglophones) and the secessionists (anglophones). The current Anglophone crisis reveals at least three things: the limits of the institutional recognition of a historical claim by Cameroon's Anglophone community; the questionable segmentation of power between the governing minority and the governed majority; and the procrastination in implementing the gradual transfer of segments of power from the centre to the periphery through decentralisation. All these were enshrined in the Constitution of January 18, 1996 but too slow in implementation.

In the light of the above, there are differences between the Polisario and the Ambazonian movement. Among them include the different birth context and the recognition of the Polisario by the African Union while the Ambazonian movement was not recognized. Similarly, these two movements have similarities in terms of their mode of action.

### **Profile and Modes of Action of the Polisario and the Ambazonian Movement**

Driven by a thirst for state power or material wealth, the armed fighters of the Polisario and the Ambazonian movement have a common denominator: imposing violence and suffering to arouse fear in the people to mobilise support in order to control the whole swathes of national or transnational territory in the hope of achieving the effective creation of an autonomous state. In this way, the diversification of motivations can be combined with the multiplication of groups, capable of taking up or using weapons against the government or other armed groups.



### *The Polisario: Violence and plural deviance*

As a general rule, separatism is an action promoted by an armed group or movement and it could take the form of a militia or a non-state armed group. In either case, the *modus operandi* is essentially based on the use and deprivation of violence. It is common in Africa to see insurgents invested with the ambition of seizing the wealth of an area under their influence. Such is the case of the Polisario Front. In all cases, whether driven by a thirst for power or material wealth, militias often have a common denominator: spreading violence and suffering to instil fear and secure popular support in order to control an entire swathe of national or transnational territory. In some cases, the diversification of motivations can be combined with the multiplication of groups capable of taking up or using weapons against the government or other armed groups (Dabone, 2012, p.3). In this way, the motivations or objectives pursued by separatist movements can, depending on the issues at stake, undergo a hierarchisation or mutation, ranging from challenging the authority of the state to the imposition of a particular state or the pursuit of wealth.

The Polisario is regularly criticised for its use of violence in reports by international organisations and human rights groups on the misappropriation of humanitarian aid for refugees and displaced persons in the Tindouf camps (Amnesty International, 2019). The 2007 OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office) report, made public in 2015, denounced the allegation of mismanaging humanitarian aid funds. These embezzlements ran up to a total of 105 million euros between 1994 and 2005. In addition to this, Algeria was not only accused in the report of having illegally levied a 5% tax on the amount of humanitarian aid intended to finance purchases in Algeria (OLAF Spécial Handing, 2007/I/0061),<sup>6</sup> but Polisario leaders had also stored the misappropriated aid before redistributing it in sub-Saharan markets, Mauritania to be specific. Similarly, it was discovered that some Polisario leaders, guilty of the same embezzlement, also purchased luxury villas in Southern Europe. In addition to these misappropriations of humanitarian aid, Algeria was accused of intentionally exaggerating the number of refugees in the Tindouf Camps in order to unfairly obtain substantial aid from humanitarian agencies. This mafia-like partition proliferated and could, at least in part, justify

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<sup>6</sup> These misappropriations were denounced by Mr Alain Marc, UMP senator for Aveyron (France), through written question no 16595 addressed to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development, during the 14th legislature of the Senate, on 4 June, 2015.

the opposition of Polisario and Algeria to the census of the Tindouf camp population by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Today, Polisario fighters, made up of hundreds of young people from the Tindouf camps are deserting the camps and swelling the ranks of recruits for smuggling and organised crime in the Sahel. A study published in November 2005 by the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (Moniquet, 2005, p.5), indicates that 6,000 Polisario fighters, around 60% of the workforce, exasperated by the opulence of the movement's leaders and delays in the payment of their salaries, had retreated to Mauritania where they have become businessmen. At the same time, the Polisario is losing more and more legitimacy among the population of the Tindouf camps and surrounding areas. As a result of this, the emergence of dissident currents such as the *Khat Achahid* (Way of the Martyr) movement, created in July 2004 advocates negotiation to resolve the conflict. It is clear from several reports that Polisario is involved in smuggling and organised crime in Sahelistan (Laurent, 2013). Polisario's involvement in the smuggling trade makes it a criminal movement as "the Polisario Front's Sahrawi refugee camps in southwest Algeria, southern Libya and northern Mali are also transit zones (for arms smuggling). Because of its strategic position, the town of Tindouf represents the ideal point of passage between the Sahel in the east and the Sahel in the west (Ammour, 2006, p.3). All in all, the spread of criminal acts on the outskirts of Tindouf and Polisario's connections with the myriad of terrorist groups in the Sahel now constitutes a regional, African and international peace and security issue (Tamekamta, 2021, pp.186-196).

The violence that occurred in the Polisario movement, compared with the Ambazonian movement, tends to be limited in space. The escalation of violence between armed elements of the Polisario and the Moroccan armed forces was generally observed in the border zone between Morocco and Algeria (not far from the Tindouf camps) and between Morocco and Mauritania (Gueguerate, for example). On the other hand, Ambazonian armed groups in Cameroon were not only widespread in both regions, but also in the villages. In addition to this, they also carried out attacks beyond these two regions (in particular Babadjou, Bagam, Fongo-Tongo and Kouoptamo in the western region; Matouké and Mombo in the Littoral region). Since the open war (1976-1989) between the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces and Polisario fighters (Bontems, 1984, pp.141-142), Morocco has built a sand wall several thousand kilometres long to prevent raids by Polisario forces on Moroccan territory (Bennafla, 2013). The United Nations Mission

for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), created by Security Council Resolution 690 (1991) on 29 April 1991, theoretically limited the Polisario's use of violence.

### *The Ambazonian movement: Violence and atrocities*

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, which erupted in November 2016, was the result of several factors expressed in the forms of frustration, marginalisation and exclusion of the Anglophone minority. This is attested to by several sources (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Noah, 2023, etc.). Overall, the English-speaking minority faced socio-economic disparities (allocation of investment projects through the public investment budget), political under-representation in government services, non-involvement and non-participation in decision-making, and so on. They have also been neglected for their linguistic, cultural, political and historical specificities in English-speaking regions (Razafindrakoto & Roubaud, 2022). For example, in 2017, 52% of serving magistrates in the North West were French-speaking (Crawford et al., 2022, pp.18-24). This is why, since November 2016, an open war of secession, marked by the use of violence has been taking place in Cameroon. Despite gestures of appeasement (like halting the prosecution of some secessionists and releasing others)<sup>7</sup> made by government authorities (Tchinda, 2021, p.10), the situation has been complicated by the interference of armed groups, supported by an incisive identity-based diaspora. Thus, an initial, non-exhaustive balance sheet drawn up between January 2017 and June 2018 by government authorities reported: 120 schools set on fire; 123 attacks resulting in 84 deaths (including 32 soldiers, 42 gendarmes, 7 policemen, 2 prison guards and 1 eco-guard); 74,994 internally displaced persons (IDPs), including 66,262 in the South-West Region and 8,732 in the North-West Region (Machikou, 2018, p.120; International Crisis Group, 2019, p.1).

In April 2019, International Crisis Group sounded the alarm with another assessment: 1,850 deaths since September 2017; more than 170 villages destroyed; 530,000 internally displaced people and 35,000 refugees in Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2019, p.1). Since 2020, this

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to these measures, other economic and social responses include: the creation, by Presidential Decree No 2017/013 of 23 January 2017 establishing and operating the National Commission for the Promotion of Multiculturalism; the Emergency Humanitarian Assistance Plan (CFAF 12.7 billion, or €19.3 million) to restore a conducive living environment and ensure the flourishing of communities in the North West and South West; Presidential Decree No 2018/719 of 30 November 2018 creating the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (NCDDR).

crisis has taken on a more dramatic tone, with hundreds of thousands of casualties. These are the victims of dozens of armed groups hidden in the North-West and South-West regions claiming to be from an imaginary republic of Ambazonia and calling themselves *Amba-boys*. They claim to be protecting *Amba Land*, a promised land (Machikou, 2018, pp.115-138), and resort to almost daily exactions and horrific acts such as killing and maiming members of the security forces; killing, torturing or maiming Anglophone civilians apparently unfavourable to secession; kidnapping civilians to demand ransom; kidnapping teachers and students to impose school closures; imposing a state of emergency placing civilians under house arrest for days on end; beating and raping women and girls, and so on.

The various separatist militias - some of which seemed peaceful at first - were scattered in villages more or less distant from administrative centres. In 2017, for example, the Southern Cameroon Ambazonia Consortium United Front (SCACUF) was informally created, bringing together former leaders of the SCNC (Southern Cameroons National Council), including Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, who advocated a peaceful struggle for the secession of English-speaking Cameroon. Subsequently, a number of influential separatist militias emerged: the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) led by Cho Lucas Ayaba and Benedict Nwana Kuah, with the former now in exile in Norway; the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADEF) led by Ebenezer Derek Mbongo Akwanga; the namesake group, Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SCDF) headed by Nso Foncha Nkem; the Ambazonia Restoration Army led by Ayamba Peter, and so on. In addition to these, there are other small groups (a few dozen people) resulting from splits in existing militias (*Ambazonian Tigers*, *Vipers*, *Ambaland Forces*, etc.) (Loungou & Meye, 2022, p.6), organised mainly on a geographical basis. Such is the case of Bui Unity Warriors; Mountain Fako Lions, Lebialem Red Dragons; Marine Forces of Bambalang; Buffalos of Bali Nyonga, and so on (Amnesty International, 2023, p.13). Initially, all these armed groups had the same objective: the creation of an independent state called the Republic of Ambazonia through the use of extreme violence.

However, given the internal disagreements and leadership quarrels, the mapping of these groups reveals two trends. The first trend being military and political, which is currently embodied by the Ambazonia Defence Forces and the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces. These armed groups have a broader base with branches in both English-speaking regions. The second trend is made up of the multitude of community-based armed groups scattered throughout the villages

from which they draw fighters, who live off the war economy and the slackening of state authority. Such is the case of Bui Unity Warriors; Mountain Fako Lions, Lebialem Red Dragons; Marine Forces of Bambalang and Buffalos of Bali Nyonga. In all cases, these armed groups have the same *modus operandi* and the same strategy, which is the use of violence to weaken the State. Likewise, these armed groups practise pure terrorism through: extortion, kidnapping for ransom, bombings, the general boycott of ordinary activities, attacks on pupils and schools (Human Rights Watch, 2021, pp.30-32), targeted attacks and assassinations against security forces and civil servants, including civilians who refuse to cooperate with them (Amnesty International, 2023, pp.12-13), etc.

Finally, there are self-defence groups, the best-known of which are from the Mbororo community- a part of the Fulani ethnic group that have allied with Cameroon's armed forces. (Muhammadou, 2018, p.19). They are often accused of committing acts of violence against people suspected of collaborating with separatists as well as with neighbouring farming communities over land disputes. (Muhammadou, 2018, pp.10-11). According to Amnesty International, this community (scattered across the seven departments of the North-West region) have been responsible for a wide range of serious atrocities, including the death of 162 Mbororos, around 300 dwellings being burnt down, 2,500 head of cattle being killed or captured and 102 people kidnapped, resulting in the payment of almost 270,000 euros in ransom money (Offner, 2021). All these groups have virtually the same *modus operandi* despite being spread across the land with over twenty camps Each militia has a hierarchical structure built around a designated or self-proclaimed leader ("general") known as the field commander. The latter is subordinate to the senior commander, who communicates with leaders abroad. All militias, although apparently driven by a common objective (separatism), are characterised by incessant divisions and reunions; hence the often-reported clashes between them. The multitude of armed groups in North-West Cameroon can be attributed to internal dissension within their original or previous groups.

It has become clear that the reason for this is due to the disagreements that arose within various militia groups as the progress of their agenda seemed to come to a halt as crisis grew. Examples of the crisis faced by various militia groups include: the dispute over the sharing of financial funds from collections around the world; the contestation of the strategic orientation of the leaders of the armed groups, some of whom wanted to give priority to negotiating with the

government; leadership disputes within certain armed groups; the rigidity of the command of the armed groups; dissension over control of the areas where illegal taxes are levied; the refusal of certain rank-and-file fighters to commit atrocities against the civilian population at the request of the commander, and so on. This is why armed groups have multiplied and diversified. Many have retreated to areas of control (generally the home village of one of the group's commanders), often identified by the group's name.

In the light of the above, there is a difference and a similarity in the way the two movements act. The difference relates to the ideological movement behind the demand. In fact, the Polisario movement is the main and only interlocutor of the Saharawi people based in Tindouf, whereas in the north-west of Cameroon, the Ambazonian movement is ideologically supported by several armed groups (often community-based), which are increasingly opposed to each other. As for the similarities, they are linked to the use of violence and the illicit levying of taxes through the control of trade routes (between Algeria and Mauritania for the Polisario; between Cameroon and Nigeria for the Ambazonian movement). UN Resolution 690 of 29 April 1991, the result of a series of talks between the parties involved (Morocco, Polisario, Algeria and Mauritania), is a special case. Surprisingly, the Ambazonian movement's claim to independence was not the subject of concern either to the UN or to African organisations. Above all, one of the points of convergence between the two movements is their positioning on the regional chessboard for geopolitical purposes. However, today the two movements have the similarity of demanding separation rather than federalism. The Polisario movement has always called for the creation of a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in southern Morocco, while the Ambazonian movement is calling for the creation of a republic in western Cameroon (made up of the country's two English-speaking regions), following the failure of its call for a return to federalism.

### **Separatism in the Face of Current Geopolitical Challenges: The Urgent Need for Regional Security**

The two separatist movements under consideration, like most separatist groups, seek to influence regional geopolitical dynamics. This is achieved by seeking to establish extra-state political connections and cross-border military alliances. From this point of view, there are real

differences between the Polisario and the Ambazonian movement concerning the lack of recognition of one (Ambazonian movement) and the partial recognition of the other (Polisario).

*Cameroon: Separatism revived in the name of regional peace and security*

Ambazonian separatism, initially supported by an exiled English-speaking elite, is declining in momentum, even though atrocities continue to be perpetrated by a multitude of armed groups with no hierarchy and no known leadership. Indeed, since the arrest in Nigeria and subsequent extradition to Cameroon of the self-proclaimed president of the Republic of Ambazonia, Sisuku Ayuk Tambe on January 5, 2018, (along with his nine lieutenants including Nfor Ngala Nfor, Fidelis Nde Che, Henry Kimeng, Pr Awasum, Dr Cornelus Kwanga, Tassang wildfried, Barrister Ayambe Elias, Dr Ojong Okongho, Barrister Nalowa Bih), the crisis has become bogged down, with the near-impossible prospect of separatism being accepted by Cameroon's government authorities and the African community. The scale of the violence and the seriousness of the atrocities committed by separatist fighters (and to some extent by regular armed forces), as well as the geographical location of English-speaking Cameroon make it a zone with major geostrategic and security stakes. Clearly, the security and stability of Cameroon's neighbours, particularly Nigeria, depends on Cameroon's ability to turn the Gulf of Guinea into a zone of enhanced peace. Given the proximity of English-speaking Cameroon to Nigeria's Niger Delta, which has been troubled by armed separatism for several decades, over 21,000 refugees (68 000 refugees in 2022) from English-speaking Cameroon reside in Nigeria (Institute for Security Studies, 2023, p.5).

Similarly, the Nigerian President at the time, Muhamadu Buhari, made sure that his country would not be used as a staging area to destabilise another sovereign and friendly state (Vanguard). This is all the more justified given Nigeria's painful memory of the 1967 Biafra war. Similarly, the two countries (Nigeria and Cameroon) have not yet completely settled the dispute over the Bakassi peninsula, which was settled by the ruling of October 10, 2020 by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which recognized the peninsula as part of Cameroon. Beyond this clear Nigerian position justified by geopolitical stakes and the preservation of regional security, several external partners and international organisations have not responded to the petitions and demands of Ambazonia's expatriate leaders. France, Great Britain and the USA regularly call for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, with strict respect

for the country's unity. Meanwhile, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, "urges the government to launch independent investigations into human rights violations committed by state security forces as well as abuses perpetrated by armed elements" (UN, 2018). The position of the European Union (AFP, 2018) and the UN also remains constant. For them, the use of violence cannot be used to achieve political objectives.

They urge the Cameroonian government and security forces to make proportionate use of force in the exercise of their duties, while vigorously condemning the abuses committed by separatist fighters. In other words, no State, organisation or NGO has endorsed separatism in Cameroon, given the regional geopolitics that require security vigilance at the risk of general political destabilisation. The North-West and South-West of the Cameroon border with Nigeria (Niger Delta), is also under threat from independence movements in the Niger Delta (east of the country) from the Reformed Egbesu Boys of the Niger Delta; Adaka Boro Avengers, Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force, Niger Delta Revolutionary Crusaders, Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), etc. (Augé, 2009; Tamekamta, 2015). Furthermore, the Niger Delta is one of Nigeria's richest areas (oil and fisheries resources) and is close to Bakassi, which was the subject of a dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria from 1994 to 2002. All the threats linked to the existence of these independence movements, as well as maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, represent a major challenge for security and stability in the sub-region.

While awaiting a favourable outcome to these problems, several initiatives have been developed by the government to halt the crisis supported by the separatist movement. One of which is the Great national dialogue of October 2019, which concluded, among many others, the recognition of the cultural specificity of the English-speaking zone and established common law in the crisis zone. Another is the special status of the English-speaking regions, which involves the creation of regional assemblies for the North-West and South-West Region.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this is the creation of the post of Public Independent Conciliator (decree no. 2020/773 of 24 December

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<sup>8</sup> The regional assemblies for the North West and South West are each made up of: a House of Divisional Representatives with 70 members elected indirectly by the municipal councils and a House of Chiefs with 20 members made up of chiefs selected by their peers. For more details, read International Crisis Group, « Cameroon: re-examining the “special status” of the English-speaking regions », *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, no. 188, 31 March 2023, pp.12-13.



2020) in the North-West and South-West Region. According to this decree, the Public Independent Conciliator is responsible for examining and amicably settling disputes between users and the regional and communal administration. It is also responsible for: defending and protecting the rights and freedoms between citizens and the Region or the Communes of the Region, devising and implementing measures to prevent and combat direct or indirect discrimination against users of regional or communal services and ensuring that people working in the regional or communal administration comply with their ethical obligations, etc. In Morocco, the Polisario movement is also presented as a threat to national and sub-regional peace.

### *Morocco: Separatism postponed for peace and security in the Sahel*

As we can see, the SADR is a figment of the imagination of certain political operators, with no socio-political or territorial reality. For neither the regions of southern Morocco (Dakhla Oued-Eddahab and Laâyoune-Sakia el Hamra), nor the ten other regions of Morocco<sup>9</sup> have any visible and established attributes of sovereignty other than those internationally recognized for the Kingdom of Morocco. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, self-proclaimed in 1976 by the Polisario with the help of Algeria, lacks attributes of sovereignty and legal status, and is not recognised by the permanent members of the UN Security Council and several international organisations around the world. After the 45 countries that disavowed it in December 2016, seven other countries (Suriname, Zambia, Jamaica, Guatemala, Laos, Honduras and the Kingdom of Lesotho) decided, on October 4, 2019, to freeze recognition of the SADR. This makes a total of at least 160 countries that do not recognize this republic (Abourabi, 2020, pp.299-300; Fabricius, 2022, p.1).

In view of these challenges, it is important to include new aspects in the analysis of the new configurations. These aspects or views should not only be African, but also and above all region,

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<sup>9</sup> By decree n°. 2-15-40 of Jumada I 1436 (February 20, 2015) setting the number of regions, their names, their chief towns and the prefectures and provinces that make them up, Morocco has twelve regions: the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceir region (with Tangier-Assilah as its capital); the L'oriental region (with Oujda-Angad as its capital); the Fès-Meknès region (with Fès as its capital); the region of Rabat-Salé-Kénitra (with Rabat as its capital); the region of Béni Mellal-Khénifra (with Mellal-Khénifra as its capital); the region of Casablanca-Settat (with Casablanca as its capital); Marrakech-Safi region (with Marrakech as capital); Drâa-Taffilalet region (with Errachidia as capital); Souss-Massa region (with Agadir-Ida-Ou-Tanane as capital); the Guelmim-Oued Noun region (with Guelmim as its capital); the Laâyoune-Sakia El Hamra region (with Laâyoune as its capital) and the Dakhla Oued-Eddahab region (with Oued-Eddahab as its capital).

in the construction of power around the Sahara. Parameters such as trans-Saharan migration, international terrorism, the Arab Spring, etc. must therefore be taken into account. It's all about the interplay of divergent interests and the politics of reciprocal influence, which often crystallise passions. Indeed, the Sahel has gradually become a zone of trafficking and rebellion. The Sahel has undergone two major geopolitical shifts: the change in cocaine roads (Berghezan; 2012/6)<sup>10</sup> from Latin America to Europe and the rise of terrorism from Mali. And it is in this area, once coveted by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) now Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), that the violence associated with radical Islam is exploding. The Polisario movement also draws some of its fighters from this area (Moniquet, 2010, pp.14-17). In the current political context in the Sahel, the destabilising dynamics are interlocking to make the responses complex. Separatism will be a destabilising factor for sub-regional and regional security. Indeed, the proliferation of criminal activities and violent jihadism led by armed terrorist groups, and the risk of a regional conflagration (or even an extension to other parts of Africa), constitute security challenges for States and the international community. The collusion between the Polisario movement and other armed groups in the region suggests a real risk.

Faced with separatism supported by the Polisario movement, the international community, through the UN Security Council, is largely in favour of a political solution. Morocco is committed to finding a consensual solution. To this end, it has adopted a constructive approach, drawing up and submitting an initiative for the negotiation of an autonomy statute for the Sahara region. Drawn up by the Kingdom of Morocco, this initiative was submitted to the UN General Secretariat in April 2007. It is an innovative and open initiative with a clear and effective purpose through which the people of the Sahara are called upon to participate fully in the democratic management of their affairs within the framework of Morocco's sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity. In view of the UN's persistent call for a realistic, pragmatic and lasting political solution based on compromise, the Moroccan proposal has therefore met with approval and a favourable response. Resolution 1754, adopted by the Security Council on April 30, 2007, confirmed the pre-eminence of the Moroccan proposal presented to the UN Secretary-General on April 11, 2007, welcoming the "serious and credible

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<sup>10</sup> This change followed the increase in cocaine consumption in the United States and several European countries between the 1980s and 1990s, which led the authorities in these countries to step up repression of the production, transport and marketing of this drug, produced mainly in Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador and marketed by powerful cartels. See also G. Berghezan, "Panorama du trafic de cocaïne en Afrique de l'Ouest", *Rapport du GRIP*, 2012/6.

efforts made by Morocco to move forward towards a settlement". Since then, all Security Council Resolutions have mentioned and recognized the relevance of the Moroccan proposal or Initiative. The Moroccan initiative or Moroccan proposal for autonomy in the Sahara region is the commitment made by Morocco in 2007 to find a definitive political solution to the dispute over the Sahara. The Moroccan proposal is part of the process of building a modern democratic society based on the rule of law and individual and collective freedom. From a structural point of view, the Moroccan initiative offers greater guarantees and prospects for autonomy. It gives the autonomous Sahara region greater powers in the social and cultural spheres, etc. (Fougerouse, 2008, pp.157-191).

In the light of the above, it can be stated that the Polisario and the Ambazonian movement constitute a threat to internal and external peace. Both movements not only demand the creation of independent states (the Republic of Ambazonia and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), but also use armed fighters who make their livelihood from illicit arms and munitions sales circuits (in the Sahel for the Polisario and in the Gulf of Guinea for the Ambazonian movement). The obvious consequence is the cross-border spread of insecurity, which constitutes a threat to sub-regional peace. This is made clear by the lack of collective initiative taken by sub-regional organisations: the Arab Maghreb Union in North Africa; the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) or the Gulf of Guinea Commission in Central Africa. On analysis, each of the two independent movements studied has established links with various criminal groups and traffickers in each area. One of the movements, the Polisario, has support in Morocco's neighbouring country (Algeria), while the other, the Ambazonian movement, is neither recognised nor supported by Nigeria. However, to deal with separatism, the governments of the two countries have drawn up and proposed a political solution: autonomy for the Sahara region for Morocco; special status for the English-speaking regions for Cameroon.

These two separatist movements have real similarities such as: a common ideology, a constant desire for territorial contestation, the permanent use of violence, connections with external actors, support not obtained from the international community, the development of an economy of war and predation, major atrocities committed by armed combatants, the violation of human rights, and so on. On the other hand, these two separatists do have a few differences. The Polisario movement is supported by Algeria, while the Ambazonian movement is rejected by

Cameroon's neighbouring country, Nigeria. The Ambazonian movement is made up of a multitude of armed groups that do not share the same ideological projection or the same *modus operandi*; hence the major risk to the peace and security of the people and states concerned. Indeed, given the current geopolitical and security stakes in the Sahel (Polisario's area of operation) and in the Gulf of Guinea (area of operation of Ambazonian armed groups), separatism represents a major risk that States and the African and international community cannot take.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to make a comparative study of two independent movements: one in North Africa (the Polisario movement) and the other in Central Africa (the Ambazonian movement). On the basis of documentary data and field observation, it was found that both movements use violence with the hope of achieving their mission, which is, the creation of independent states. Although the socio-cultural realities are different in North and Central Africa, it is clear that Polisario is a movement with a single board, whereas the Ambazonian movement is made up of several armed groups scattered across the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon. In either case, their demands, the way they are organised, their strategies, their degree of involvement in the conflicts and the internationalisation or otherwise of the support they may receive are of concern to the states concerned (Morocco and Cameroon), and to the African and international community. However, there are several dividing lines between the two movements: The Polisario Front proclaimed the creation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic State on 27 February 1976, with the support of Algeria, and had been admitted as a member of the OAU since 1982, which implies its recognition in Africa by certain States. However, it is accepted that the recognition of its sovereignty by the United Nations is not yet effective, unlike the Ambazonian movement in Cameroon, which has no official support from any state or international organisation and does not have the attributes of a state. At the same time, it is to be hoped that sub-regional organisations will become more involved in the fight against security threats (of which separatism is one). This can be done by invoking, in particular, Article 4 of the Revised Treaty of 18 December 2019 which says, establishing the Economic Community of Central African States or Article 2 of the Treaty establishing the Arab Maghreb Union, signed on 17 February 1989.

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The author has reported no potential conflict of interest.

## **Biographical Note**

Alphonse Zozime Tamekamta defended a PhD at the University of Yaoundé I (Cameroon) on "The economic and cultural foundations of socio-political crises in the CEMAC zone (1960-2010)". Preoccupied with issues of governance, violent extremism, conflict and security in the CEMAC zone, he has worked as a researcher and expert in several international research centers, including Thinking Africa (Abidjan), GRIP (Brussels), ROP (Montreal) etc. He has authored and co-authored over 42 scientific articles and 10 books published by L'Harmattan, Edilivre, Editions Cheikh Anta Diop, PAF, Quebec University Press and Afrédit. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in the History Department of the Higher Teacher Training College/University of Yaoundé 1 and the Co-founder/Deputy Director of the « African Research Center for Peace and Sustainable Development»-CARPADD-Montréal.

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