

The Ambazonians and the Impact of Structures and Leadership

Cameroon has been experiencing a secessionist uprising since October 2016 that has recently begun to take a violent turn. On November 30, 2017 the president of Cameroon announced a war on the terrorist group the Ambazonian Defense Force. On October 24, 2019 the government of Cameroon made an announcement that despite their claims, the Ambazonian Defense Force did not attack a governor's convoy. The Ambazonians are a unique group because the structure of their organization and leadership has not been defined and is largely based on tribal alliances. Therefore, the ability of the group to claim responsibility and convince a nation that they committed an attack that never actually happened is quite impressive. The current successes, as demonstrated in the recent claims of attacks, of the Ambazonian Independence Fighters can explain by analyzing their organizational structure and leadership style.

As early mentioned, the secessionist movement, also referred to as the Anglophone Crisis, formally began in October of 2016 when the Ambazonian population of Cameroon declared their independence. Their declaration was prompted because the English-speaking population of Cameroon, the Anglophones, has felt marginalized by the French-speaking populations, the Francophones, in the country for decades. Recently though, much of the English curriculum was removed from schools in Cameroon which was interpreted by the Anglophones as an attempt to erase the English language. The initial dissent came largely from lawyers who argued that the action was unconstitutional. The ethnic lines between the Francophones and Anglophones exist due colonial agreements that were implemented during the 20th century. To briefly explain, the French controlled Northern Cameroon and the English controlled Southern Cameroon until the mid-1960's when the two were incorporated by a vote in the United Nations that largely excluded the people of Southern Cameroon from the decision.

The Ambazonian Independence Movement is made up of various insurgent groups with the most widely known being the Ambazonian Defense Force. On October 21st, 2019 rumors spread that the group had attacked a governor's convoy in the north west region of Cameroon and that two people had been killed. Three days later the government of Cameroon announced that no attack had happened, and no one had been killed. If the Ambazonian Defense Force had attacked the governor's convoy it would be a shift in their normal tactics since they have been known to target schools due to collective anger over the Cameroon shift in curriculum.

Despite that the insurgent movement is relatively young, the current structure of the organization has proved to be successful. The broad inclusion of various insurgent groups who support Ambazonian independence rather than an exclusive community has allowed for the group to build their organization while simultaneously carrying out a high number of attacks with little concern for a resource trade off. As discussed by Shapiro, terrorist organizations must decide on how to best utilize their resources while maximizing their operational security (2013). The Ambazonian Defense Force have decided to allow for various groups to commit attacks in the name of independence as an effective, low cost way to bring awareness and legitimacy to their cause. Simultaneously, the leadership of the group is working to build the groups' organizational structures and governance ability rather than planning elaborate attacks. This strategy though, does have the potential issue of the principal – agent problem. The principal – agent problem occurs when the principal, who is giving orders, is unsure of the commitment level of the agent, the one carrying out orders. This can result in poorly planned and executed attacks or the loss of an organization's funds (Shapiro 2013). In the case of the Ambazonian Defense Force, by allowing a wide range of actors to commit attacks, the group loses a level of control on how well those attacks are both planned and executed. Still, the current structure of

the Ambazonian Independence Fighters is successful because they are a relatively new organization.

As briefly mentioned, the current leadership of the Ambazonians is loosely based on tribal alliances within Southern Cameroon that closely resembles a star format of a social network. This formation has various cells of operation that are all in communication with a centralized leadership body at the center. All the cells will be in conversation with the central power but not with each other. This ensures that if one cell is disrupted by the government it will not destroy the whole organization (Jordan 2009). In the Ambazonian Independence Movement, there are various groups at the tribal level that are all in contact with the Ambazonian Defense Force, which is the most centralized group. This largely decentralized model of leadership has been successful for the group because they are less susceptible to government infiltration. Rather than focusing resources on the vetting of new recruits, the group can instead focus on other concerns such as growing their influence and legitimacy. Still, the decentralized nature of the group can lead to an increase in civilian violence and ultimately a decrease in popular support. In an organization that has minimal leadership structure, there is a possibility that because it lacks the tools to discipline foot soldiers, civilians will experience more indiscriminate violence (Abrahms and Potter 2015). According to the Human Rights Watch though, the Ambazonian Defense Force and their various smaller cells of operation have avoided civilian casualties. The group has largely focused their activities on arsons, kidnappings, and threats of violence. Therefore, as of right now, the group has been aided by their choice of leadership style in the early phases of their strategy. By not having to devote resources to preventing leadership disruption from the government of Cameroon, the Ambazonian Defense Force has been able to prioritize building their influence and name recognition throughout the country. Considering they

were able to convince many that they had killed two individuals in an attack on a governor's convoy, the Ambazonian Defense Force has effectively established their presence and power in the region.

The Ambazonian Defense Force has benefited from their decision to adopt a loosely structured organization and decentralized leadership style. The inclusive perspective that the various groups of the Ambazonian independence fighters have developed has allowed the most cohesive group, the Ambazonian Defense Force, to make the strategic choice to focus on developing their cause and its legitimacy while transferring the responsibility of attacks to smaller cells. Furthermore, the group has been able to focus on building recognition by adopting a decentralized leadership structure that can not be easily infiltrated by government forces. The Ambazonian Defense Force can focus on uniting tribes and building the movement rather than focusing on the threat of infiltration. The success of this model was proven when the country of Cameroon believed that the Ambazonian Defense Force successfully carried out an attack for four days until the government could prove that it did not happen. A group with little name recognition or legitimacy would not have been able to accomplish that. Therefore, it will be interesting to watch the group as they mature and are forced to make additional strategic choices that will influence the future direction of the secessionist conflict.

Links to information on the Ambazonian activity and background knowledge:

<https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-two-wounded-in-amba-fighters-attack-on-nw-governors-convoy/>

<https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-govt-debunks-claims-of-attack-on-nw-governors-convoy/>

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/cameroon>

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/07/19/these-killings-can-be-stopped/abuses-government-and-separatist-groups-cameroons>