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CAMEROON: Secessionist minority Anglophone group silenced

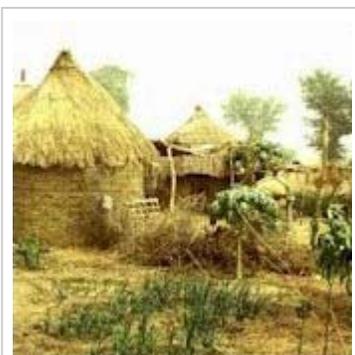


Photo: FAO

Anglophones comprise a 20 per cent minority in Francophone Cameroon

YAOUNDE, 19 February 2007 (IRIN) - About 20 members of an Anglophone secessionist group in Cameroon have been jailed for the past month without charge, reflecting what their lawyers say is the latest effort to silence government critics without providing due process.

The members of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) were detained on 20 January when they attempted to hold a press conference led by the group's vice chairman, Nfor Ngala Nfor. Two scheduled hearings on the case have been postponed.

"The authorities arrested them under the pretext that they weren't authorised to hold the meeting," said Blaise Berinyuy, a lawyer for the group. "In recent years arrests of this kind have been commonplace and the situation hasn't improved."

The SCNC has been calling for the secession of the two northwestern Anglophone provinces of Cameroon since 1993, protesting what it says is the marginalisation of Cameroon's English-speaking minority. They represent 20 percent of Cameroon's 16.6 million people.

After a series of clashes with security forces in the 1990s, the Cameroonian government in 2001 banned the group.

"Any meeting they have cannot be validated by the authorities and it is therefore illegal," said Abada Assomo, a spokesman for the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation. "When the members of the SCNC have a meeting it is normal to arrest them. They aren't arrested in an arbitrary manner because they are doing something illegal."

Lingering problem

The League of Nations in 1922 divided Cameroon into two zones, one administered by France and the other by the United Kingdom. The French side won independence in 1960 but the Anglophone side had to choose between being absorbed into Nigeria or into the new French-speaking Cameroon. Northern Cameroon chose Nigeria while Southern Cameroon joined French-speaking Cameroon in 1961.

Little by little, the autonomy of Southern Cameroon eroded until its dissolution in 1972 with the formation of a centralised state. As time passed, Anglophone Cameroonians felt increasingly marginalised, according to human rights groups.

President Paul Biya, who came to power in 1982, opened up Cameroon's political system to multiparty politics in 1990 in line with a continent-wide democracy movement. During presidential elections two years later, Anglophone candidate John Fru Ndi stood against Biya, and lost. Anglophones protested Biya's victory, claiming widespread fraud.

"It is fair to say that since the relative opening of political space... there has been increased agitation for generally a devolution of powers, less concentration of power in a geographic sense but also in terms of access to key forms of public office," said Paul Simo, a human rights lawyer from Cameroon who lives in Nigeria.

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"The political arrowhead for this has been the SCNC," said Simo, who does not represent the group.

Claims of repression

Actions against the government have included the occupation in 1999 of the offices of the national television broadcasting station in Buea, about 500km west of the capital, Yaounde. Members of the SCNC announced the independence of Anglophone Cameroon.

Three SCNC members were killed and five others injured in 2001 during demonstration on the 40th anniversary of the unification of the two Cameroons.

Last December, violence erupted at the University of Buea after students accused the government of trying to put Francophones on a list of candidates for medical school. One student and a former student were killed in clashes with security forces.

"Ever since the independence of the country, the Cameroonian government has never wanted to take into account the claims of the Anglophones," according to the International Federation for Human Rights in a 2003 report. It deplored "the assassinations, arbitrary arrests and poor treatment, attacks on the freedom of opinion, expression and association and demonstration" involving the SCNC.

Way forward

During the 20 January press conference, Nfor Ngala Nfor had announced that he had sent a petition to the United Nations Human Rights Committee calling for it to take a position on the question of "the annexation, the brutal occupation and the colonisation of the Southern Cameroons by the Republic of Cameroon".

A few months ago it appeared as if the government was opening up to the idea of dialogue with the SCNC.

"But they never came to the meetings that they themselves had convened to meet with the SCNC," said Berinyuy, the group's lawyer.

Human rights attorney Paul Simo said the opportunity exists for the government to address broader problems affecting Cameroonians brought to the surface by the SCNC.

"There is certainly recognition among key constitutional experts, legal experts and key political figures in Francophone Cameroon that the question, because it goes to the heart of national unity and identity, is a question that ought to be addressed," Simo said.

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