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# Anatomy of a Calculated Failure: An Analysis of Cameroon's 2019 National Dialogue and Anglophone Crisis

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## Abstract

This paper engages in an in-depth overview, theoretically informed examination of the 2019 Major National Dialogue (MND), assessing its incapacity in addressing the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon. This paper argues that the failure of the MND was not simply unfortunate but rather a direct result of its fundamentally flawed framework which favoured a state-centric, top-down approach against genuine, inclusive peacebuilding. Using qualitative case study approach involving secondary data, reports and documents, the study employs a theoretical framework integrating John Burton's Human Needs Theory and Johan Galtung's concepts of positive and negative peace to dissect the dialogue's fundamental shortcomings. This assessment shows that the MND's incapacity resulted from a profound lack of inclusivity of key stakeholders (belligerents), agenda imposition that shunned discussions about the conflict's root causes, and the notorious non-involvement of a neutral, third-party mediator. The paper concludes that the MND used a surface level approach in conflict management which could only result in a limited, superficial and unsustainable negative peace. By incapacitating the Anglophone population's integral human needs for identity, recognition, and meaningful participation, the dialogue lost its capacity for resolution and fostered conflict intensification and intractability which has unravelled a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in its aftermath.

**Keywords:** *Anglophone Crisis, Cameroon, Major National Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, Peacebuilding.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has become one of Africa's most complex conflicts. It is marked by long-standing historical grievances and a devastating humanitarian toll ([Achu, 2025](#)). The conflict originated from the country's colonial history and the challenging process of post-colonial state formation ([Jeter, 2023](#)). The union of the former British Southern Cameroons and the French-administered La République du Cameroun in 1961, which created a federal republic, was originally meant to honor the unique linguistic, cultural, legal, and educational traditions of both regions ([Jeter, 2023](#)). However, the abolition of the federal system in 1972 and the subsequent creation of a highly centralized unitary state led to the progressive marginalization of the Anglophone minority ([Achu, 2018](#)). The Anglophone minority in Cameroon have faced over political disenfranchisement, economic disparity, and the perceived erosion of their distinct cultural, even though they make up approximately 20 percent of the population ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)).

These long-standing grievances culminated into a violent civil conflict in late 2016 ([Achu, 2018](#)). Lawyers and teachers organized peaceful protests denouncing the appointment of Francophone judges and teachers to Anglophone courts and schools. They argued that their lack of expertise in these institutions posed a threat of erosion to their common legal system and Anglo-Saxon educational traditions ([Achu and Tutumlu, 2023](#)). The government's violent and disproportionate response to these protests, involving mass arrests, internet blackouts and use of lethal force against unarmed civilians, worsened the conflict ([Amnesty International, 2018](#)). Initially, peaceful protests clamored for cultural preservation and a return to federalism, but these violent government responses radicalized the Anglophone masses, prompting the emergence of several armed separatist groups demanding secession and the creation of an "Ambazonia" independent state ([Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2018](#)).

Faced with a protracted insurgency in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions and mounting international pressure, President Paul Biya's government announced the convening of a "Major National Dialogue" (MND) which was took place in Yaoundé, from September 30 to October 4, 2019 ([International Crisis Group, 2019](#)). The MND's objective was to congregate "the sons and daughters of Cameroon" and develop "palliative solutions" to the Anglophone Crisis and other national challenges (Republic of Cameroon, 2019). The government praised the dialogue as a historic success, claiming it culminated in recommendations for a "special status" for the Anglophone regions and the release of some political prisoners ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)).

However, the MND's aftermath have witnessed a devastating intensification of the conflict as opposed to the resolution promised. Intensified violence has caused thousands of deaths, over one million IDPs and refugees, and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis ([Achu, 2025](#)). This glaring difference when comparing the official narrative of success and the grim reality on the ground prompts the central research question of this paper: *Why did the 2019 Major National Dialogue fail to resolve the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon?* This paper argues that the MND's failure was an inevitable outcome, embedded in its purposefully flawed design. The dialogue was a state-managed performance, not a genuine process of conflict resolution. By analysing the MND via established peacebuilding principles, this paper posits that the dialogue was structurally defective from its beginning. Its failure can be attributed to three primary, interconnected factors: a profound lack of inclusivity that excluded the conflict's main protagonists; a rigidly controlled and pre-determined agenda that explicitly forbade discussion of the conflict's root causes; and the conspicuous absence of a neutral, third-party mediator to ensure fairness and build trust ([Nchongayi, 2024](#)). The paper illustrates that these were not mere structural defaults, but strategic steps taken by the state to control the narrative and outcome. They chose to protect the centralized state power by prioritizing conflict management over genuine peacebuilding.

This paper uses a qualitative study with a theoretical framework to analyse why the dialogue failed. It applies theories from conflict resolution specifically, John Burton's Human Needs Theory and Johan Galtung's concepts of positive and negative peace to understand the conflict ([Galtung, 1969](#); [Burton, 1990](#)).

The paper relies on secondary sources such as government publications, NGO reports, academic articles, and media reports. It also critically interprets documented actions and public statements.

A substantial body of scholarly and policy-oriented literature has investigated the Anglophone Crisis, examining its history, the dynamics of the violence, and its human rights ramifications. Analyses of the Major National Dialogue by experts have highlighted its procedural deficiencies, notably the exclusion of key stakeholders ([International Crisis Group, 2019](#); [Ndiyun and Mukonza, 2025](#)). However, the vast majority of these analyses only describe and document the dialogue's shortcomings without comprehensively grounding them in theoretical thought stemming from conflict resolution framework. This has created a research gap; one that shifts from identifying *what* was wrong with the MND to explaining why these flaws were so fundamentally detrimental from a peacebuilding perspective. This paper aims to address this gap by employing established theories such as John Burton's Human Needs Theory and Johan Galtung's concepts of peace, to provide an in-depth analytical understanding of the dialogue's inherent failure.

This study's significance is multi-faceted. Primarily, it presents a theoretically grounded case study on the failure of a state-led peace initiative. It offers valuable insights to policymakers, mediators, and international actors involved in resolving comparable identity-based, intra-state conflicts in Africa and elsewhere. Secondly, by critically examining the disparity between the stated goals and actual outcomes of the MND, the paper contributes to the broader academic discourse on the limitations of dialogue when employed as tools of political manoeuvring rather than genuine instruments of reconciliation. It emphasizes the crucial difference between conflict management, which aims to control violence while maintaining existing power structures, and conflict resolution, which seeks to transform the fundamental structures and relationships that driving the conflict. Lastly, for Cameroon, this study acts as an important historical record and a warning, pointing out the necessary elements needed for any future peace process to be successful.

However, the study faces challenges inherent in studying an ongoing and highly polarized conflict which includes limited access to key figures such as high-level government decision-makers and the leadership of the fragmented and often clandestine separatist movements. Consequently, this study relies predominantly on secondary sources, including official government publications, reports from credible international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic articles, and reputable media coverage. While comprehensive, this approach relies on document-based actions rather than direct interviews from all key protagonists.

Nevertheless, beyond a simplistic and descriptive critique of the Major National Dialogue, this paper uses a two-part approach from conflict resolution and peace studies to facilitate understanding on why the dialogue failed by focusing on the underlying human dimensions of the conflict and the nature of the peace it sought to achieve. It also highlights the limitations of state-controlled dialogues in resolving deep-rooted identity conflicts. It concludes that the MND essentially a top-down exercise in conflict management, aiming for surface level negative peace, while ignoring the fundamental human needs of the Anglophone population for identity, recognition, and meaningful participation.

## 2. THE HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF A PROTRACTED CONFLICT

The roots of the Anglophone Crisis are firmly ingrained in Cameroon's colonial history. From 1884 until World War I, the territory existed as a German protectorate known as Kamerun ([USCRI, 2025](#)). After Germany's defeat in WWI, the territory was split into two League of Nations mandates. France took control of the larger portion, while the United Kingdom administered two smaller, separate regions known as British Cameroons ([Fombad, 2025](#)).

Both colonial powers incorporated their respective territories into their wider international economic systems. However, the French territory saw greater progress in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure, and had better education and healthcare by the time it gained independence ([Benneh and DeLancey, 2025](#)). The road to independence was complicated. French Cameroon became independent in 1960 ([Benneh and DeLancey, 2025](#)). In 1961 the people of British southern Cameroons had to vote in an UN-supervised Plebiscite with only two options: join the newly independent federation of Nigeria or join the independent Republic of Cameroon ([Jeter, 2023](#)). Full independence as a sovereign state was not an option on the ballot. British authorities argued that Southern Cameroons was not capable of independent operation as a country. This premise has since been challenged, but it forced a reunification based on political pragmatism rather than the full consent of the governed ([Opanike, 2017](#)). As a result, Southern Cameroons voted to join the former French Cameroun and formed the Federal Republic of Cameroon ([Ndi, 2014](#)).

The initial goal of unification was to respect the unique linguistic, cultural, legal, and educational backgrounds of both territories which was established by creating a federal republic which conferred high degree of self-governance to both Anglophone and Francophone regions ([Fombad, 2025](#)). However, this arrangement was short-lived. When the system switched from federalism to a single unified state, enabling the marginalization of the Anglophone identity ([Achu, 2018](#)). A new constitution adopted in 1972 dissolved the federal system and established a highly centralized unitary state. Anglophone leaders viewed this action as a complete betrayal of promises made during the Fouban constitutional talks ([USCRI, 2025](#)). The central government justified this move as a means to foster “national unity” and integration.

Over the subsequent decades, the Francophone-led government systematically dismantled the unique institutional characteristics of the Anglophone community’s identity ([Fombad, 2025](#)). Although the 1996 constitutional revision introduced some decentralization and a bicameral legislature, these changes were largely superficial, as executive power remained highly concentrated ([Achankeng, 2014](#)). This prolonged period of centralization and assimilation gradually undermined the Anglophone population’s perception of equal partnership within the union, fostering a sense of political and economic marginalization ([Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2003](#); [Delancey et al., 2019](#)). This illustrates a fundamental causal relationship where the failure of the initial political framework directly led to the grievances that erupted decades later. The Anglophone Crisis is not merely an emergency but a manifestation of historical structural violence.

The long-simmering tensions eventually became violent in late 2016 ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)). The situation began with peaceful sit-down strikes and protests from Anglophone lawyers and teachers ([Fombad, 2025](#)). They protested the appointment of Francophone judges and teachers to Anglophone courts and schools, which they perceived as an attack on their law legal, which is based on common law, and their traditional English style education ([Achu and Tutumlu, 2023](#)). The legal professionals advocated for the preservation of the Common law system, while educators demanded the cessation of French language instruction within Anglophone educational institutions (Fombad, 2025).

The government’s response was excessively harsh and disproportionate ([Achu, 2023](#)). The crackdown which included widespread arrests, internet blackouts, and the use of deadly force against unarmed civilians backfired ([Fombad, 2025](#)). Instead of quelling the unrest, this state sanctioned violence amplified the voices of the most extreme factions and rapidly worsened the situation. The initial peaceful demonstrations, which advocated for a return to a federal system, quickly became radicalized, leading to the formation of numerous armed separatist groups ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)). These groups demanded the creation of an independent state called “Ambazonia” (Fon et al, 2024). This reveals a crucial cause and effect relationship, showing how the government’s excessive reaction transformed a movement focused on political reform into a full-scale struggle for independence.

This confirms the Anglophone perspective of being subjected to an oppressive state that sought to erase their identity ([Keke and Nsah, 2024](#); [Amnesty International, 2018](#)). A Major National Dialogue in 2019 was a state-led initiative by the Cameroonian government aiming to resolve the Anglophone Crisis ([International Crisis Group, 2019](#)). However, the MND was organized as a response to the failure of the government's military-first strategy rather than as a genuine first step towards peace ([Beseng et al., 2023](#)). The dialogue was convened by President Paul Biya and took place in Yaoundé from September 30th to October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). The dialogue's stated objective was to convene citizens and find peaceful solution to the crisis ([International Crisis Group, 2019](#)). However, critics argued it was a top-down, state-controlled process, designed to fail from the start ([Cho, 2024](#)). The government chose most of the delegates, inviting government officials, ruling party loyalists, and moderate Anglophone figures who became the main parties and participants during the dialogue.

It is important to note that key figures involved in the conflict were intentionally left out ([Ndiyun and Mukonza, 2025](#)). Leaders of the main separatist movement and their armed groups, who are the primary combatants and hold significant influence on the ground, were not invited ([Ngonjo, 2024](#)). The government stated that separatists could participate only if they were disarmed first. However, the separatists considered this a non-starter, as they preferred disarmament to be a result of negotiations not a precondition ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). Worth noting is the fact that influential Anglophone leaders from civil societies, particularly those living abroad, were also excluded from participating ([Nchongayi, 2024b](#)). Separatist leaders like Ebenezer Akwanga publicly snubbed and dismissed the event, calling it a "smokescreen for the international community" ([Sobseh, 2024](#)). The government consistently rejected offers of neutral, third-party mediation from international actors, including Switzerland, the African Union, and the United Nations, insisting that the crisis was a purely internal affair ([Fon et al., 2024](#); [Sahli and Latimmer, 2022](#)).

Regarding key points of discussion and outcome, the MND was organized into eight commissions that focused on specific issues within the rigid framework of the existing unitary state ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). The government established a non-negotiable precondition: the "oneness and indivisibility" of the state was not up for discussion ([Sobseh, 2024](#)). This "red line" effectively removed the core political demands of federalism and secession from the agenda, which were the main goals of moderates and separatists, respectively ([Nchongayi, 2024](#)). The commissions addressed topics such as multiculturalism and bilingualism, the educational and judicial systems, the question of refugees and reconstruction, disarmament and the role of the diaspora and decentralization ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)).

The main outcome of the dialogue was the recommendation to grant a "special status" to the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions ([Ngonjo, 2024](#)). This proposal was later codified into law ([Moki, 2019](#)). The "special status" aimed to provide the regions with additional powers, particularly over their unique Anglophone education and legal systems, and established bicameral Regional Assemblies ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). Additional proposals included the development of air and sea transportation hubs within the Anglophone territories and the liberation of certain political detainees ([Sobseh, 2024](#)). Subsequent to the discussions, President Biya sanctioned the release of prominent opposition figure Maurice Kamto, along with some of his colleagues. As the central government's designated regional administrators retained ultimate authority Bruce canto along with some of his colleagues ([Babiem and Fomboh, 2025](#)). Despite the government's assertions of a successful outcome, the MND was widely condemned as a shallow endeavour that did not resolve the fundamental issues of the conflict ([Ngonjo, 2024](#)). The separatists and other anglophone factions rejected the offer of "special status", considering it a superficial adjustment that failed to provide genuine autonomy as the central government's designated regional governors retained ultimate authority ([Menyoli, 2021](#)).

Unfortunately, the Major National Dialogue failed to resolve the conflict. In fact, the conflict escalated, worsening the violence and humanitarian crisis in the Anglophone region ([Mutah, 2022](#)). Post-dialogue reports from international organizations and human rights groups confirm a surge in atrocities by both government forces and armed separatist groups ([Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025](#)). Thousands have died including at least 6000 civilians killed since 2016 ([Achu, 2025](#)). This protracted conflict caused over one million people to flee from the Anglophone regions, with more than 900,000 internally displaced within Cameroon and over 60,000 seeking refuge in Nigeria. Humanitarian aid workers and health facilities have become consistent targets for warring parties, hindering access to vital assistance and forcing international organizations to halt their humanitarian operations in some areas within the Anglophone regions ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)). Separatist groups also enforced “ghost town” operations, or ad-hoc lockdowns, and maintained school boycotts, leaving at least 2,245 schools closed which has impacted over 700,000 children ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)).

The government’s reluctance to engage in discourse with the main combatants has resulted in the fragmentation of armed opposition and exacerbated the conflict's dynamics ([Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025](#)). The incarceration of notable leaders, such as Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, has engendered a leadership void, fostering internal conflict and rivalry among opposing armed factions ([Achu, 2023](#)). This has rendered the overall context more intricate and challenging for prospective peace negotiations. Furthermore, the conflict has become increasingly lucrative for certain separatist factions, who have expanded their revenue streams through widespread kidnapping and extortion ([Bone, 2021](#)). The monetization of the conflict and the breakdown of armed groups are direct results of the unsuccessful dialogue, which strengthened the idea that armed conflict was the only viable option. This has created a more anarchic and dangerous environment for civilians ([ACLED, 2024](#)).

### 3. THE THEORETICAL LENS: DECIPHERING THE DIALOGUE’S FAILURE

This study transcends simple descriptive critiques of the MND and applies a robust theoretical framework. It uses John Burton’s Human Needs Theory, to explain why some social conflicts are difficult to resolve. Burton (1990) believed while material interests can conform to systemic changes, certain set of universal human needs are non-negotiable and cannot be compromised because they are essential for personal and group development. The denial or non-recognition of these needs has been characterized as the primary source of protracted conflict. Conflicts results when upon denial to address these needs, individuals and groups initiate a struggle often violently, to fulfil these needs ([Lederach, 1997](#)). Four of Burton’s identified needs are especially relevant to the Anglophone Crisis:

- **Identity:** It is the fundamental desire for self-perception grounded in cultural linguistic and historical affiliation. The Anglophone Crisis at its core, is essentially a battle to safeguard our unique identity that is perceived to be at risk of being absorbed by the Francophone-majority state ([Achu, 2018](#)).
- **Recognition:** This pertains to the necessity of having one’s identity, culture, and grievances acknowledged as valid, legitimate and worthy of respect by others, especially the dominant group. The prolong history of the Cameroonian state invalidating and denying the “Anglophone problem” as non-existent or the product of extremists represents a profound denial of recognition ([Achu and Tutumlu, 2023](#)).
- **Participation:** This refers to the need for individuals and groups to have agency and the ability to meaningfully engage in decisions that affect their lives and communities. The excessive centralization of the Cameroonian state has systematically denied Anglophones effective participation in their own governance ([Benneh and DeLancey, 2025](#)).

- **Security:** In this context, it extends beyond mere physical safety to encompass the preservation of one's identity and way of life. The state's use of violent repression, and the resulting armed conflict, has generated deep seated physical and existential insecurity ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)).

The government's pre-conditions for the dialogue, along with its limited offers of "special status", were aimed at addressing practical concerns like regional autonomy. However, they completely ignored the fundamental human needs for identity and recognition, and this oversight made a negotiated solution impossible under the MND's framework ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). The government's offer of "special status", while excluding federalism or secession from the discussion, revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the conflict's core discussion ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). This was not about administrative efficiency, but about institutional identity. By providing only superficial concessions that reinforce the centralized state, the government essentially ignored the Anglophone community's core needs ensuring continued conflict, as Burton's theory would predict ([Achu, 2023](#)).

Johan Galtung's seminal distinction between negative and positive peace is the second theoretical framework used for analysis in this paper. [Galtung \(1969\)](#) believed that solely focusing on terminating violence would prove inadequate for building sustainable peace in the long run. He defined:

- **Negative Peace:** This refers to the absence of direct, personal violence such as war and fighting. It most times facilitates the establishment of ceasefire or a peace agreement that only discontinues the killing in order to achieve negative peace ([Galtung and Fischer, 2013](#)). While often a necessary first step, it does not address the underlying conditions that led to the violence. The MND sought to manage the conflict by ending violence, especially when the government asserted that separatists could participate in the dialogue if they lowered their weapons yet simultaneously refused to address issues of federalism and/or marginalization which were part of the underlying conditions for peace.
- **Positive Peace:** This goes beyond the mere absence of structural violence. It signifies the removal of structural violence which refers to social, political, and economic systems and institutions that harm people by preventing them from meeting their fundamental needs and achieving their inherent capacities ([Galtung, 1969](#)). The creation of social structures that are just, equitable, and collaborative are the fundamental tenets of positive peace. This form of peace ensures that the root causes of conflict are appropriately addressed ([Galtung and Fischer, 2013](#)).

This framework provides a relevant analysis of the objectives and outcomes of the MND. While the MND's objective prioritized the restoration of the unitary state's authority by attempting to end the fighting, it failed to address the root causes of the conflict. This is a textbook pursuit of negative peace ([Galtung, 1969](#)). As such, the dialogue orchestrated its own failure by refusing to address the underlying structural violence which involved excessive centralization of power, marginalization, and lack of representation ([Ngonjo, 2024](#)). The post-dialogue intensification of violence once again, affirms Galtung's assertion that an unjust foundation cannot sustain the long-term construction of positive peace.

#### 4. THE ANATOMY OF A FLAWED DIALOGUE: A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MND'S FAILINGS

The Major National Dialogue framework depicted an intentional inadequate structure, one designed to fail from its inception. The process revealed multiple irregularities across three crucial features critical to any reliable peace process: the inclusivity of participants, the scope of the agenda, and the neutrality of the facilitation ([Lanz, 2011](#)).

The most glaring and widely criticized flaw of the MND was its deliberate exclusion of key stakeholders ([Mutah, 2022](#)). A fundamental principle of peace negotiation is that lasting peace can only be made with one's enemies ([Haugerudbraaten, 1998](#)).

A dialogue that excludes the main combatants cannot be qualified as a peace talk; rather it reflects the tenets of a political rally ([Mutah, 2022](#)). Instead, the government chose its participants including mainly government officials, ruling party loyalists, and a few moderate Anglophone figures ([Ngonjo, 2024](#)). Crucially, the leaders of the main separatist movements and their armed wings, who command influence and control territory in the Anglophone regions, were not invited ([Mutah, 2022](#)). Many of the most prominent Anglophone civil society leaders, particularly those in the diaspora, were also systematically excluded ([Aljazeera, 2019](#)).

While the government claimed that separatists were welcome if they “dropped their arms”, this was a non-starter that ignored the reality that armed groups disarm as a result of negotiations, not before them ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). This exclusionary approach was a catastrophic failure on multiple levels. It made any discussion of a ceasefire or disarmament impossible and was a profound denial of recognition to the separatist groups and their constituencies, treating them not as political actors with grievances to be addressed but as criminals to be vanquished ([Aljazeera, 2019](#)). By refusing to engage with the very people waging the war, the government ensured that the dialogue's resolutions would have no legitimacy or binding power on the ground. The conflict has continued to rage precisely because the people fighting it were never part of the conversation to end it ([Achu, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, the substance of the dialogue was as flawed as its composition already carried a pre-determined agenda that evaded the root causes of the conflict. The government established a non-negotiable red line from the outset: the “oneness and indivisibility” of the state was not up for discussion ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). This precondition effectively removed the two most critical issues from the agenda: a return to federalism, the demand of Anglophone moderates, and secession, the goal of the separatists ([USCRI, 2025](#)). By doing so, the government unilaterally dictated the terms of the debate and foreclosed any possibility of addressing the conflict's political root causes, demonstrating a clear intent to manage, not resolve, the conflict ([Sobseh, 2024](#)).

The dialogue's eight commissions focused on issues like decentralization, education, and the justice system, but within the rigid framework of the existing unitary state ([Sobseh, 2024](#)). This approach fundamentally misunderstood or perhaps deliberately ignored, that the conflict is not solely about administrative breakdown but about the very structure of the state and the Anglophone community's place within it ([Achu, 2023](#)). The dialogue's main outcome, which included the granting of a “special status” to the Anglophone regions, perfectly illustrates this shallow approach ([Nchongayi, 2024c](#)). It was another superficial gesture designed to create the illusion of development without giving up any actual power ([Achu, 2023](#)). The avoidance of these core issues denied the Anglophone community's need for identity and self-determination ([Achu and Tututmlu, 2023](#)), and solidified their perception that the state was not, and never would be, a willing participant in addressing their fundamental grievances.

Furthermore, in conflicts marked by deep-seated mistrust and a vast power imbalance, a neutral third-party mediator is crucial ([Bercovitch and Jackson, 2009](#)). A trustworthy mediator can help build confidence, improve communication, create a fair playing field, and ensure the honesty within the process ([Nathan, 2005](#)). However, the MND lacked any form of neutral, external coordination. As noted, it was moderated by the Prime Minister, a key figure of the incumbent government. This was perceived as a lack of good faith, and this immediately damaged the dialogue's legitimacy ([Aljazeera, 2019](#)). It should be noted that several external mediators from international and regional bodies have offered to facilitate peace talks. However, the Cameroonian government consistently rejected these offers of mediation from international and regional facilitators such as Switzerland, the African Union, and the United Nations, insisting that the crisis is a purely internal affair ([Fon et al., 2024](#); [Sahli and Lattimer, 2022](#)).

The government's rejection of mediation while a calculated strategy, was born out of the concern that the presence of external actors would legitimize the separatists' political claims ([Sahli and Lattimer, 2022](#)).

A neutral mediator would have enabled the preparation of an inclusive agenda, a condition, the government vehemently rejected (Cho, 2024). The absence of an impartial actor to rebuild broken trust between the parties already revealed that no genuine dialogue was possible between the state and its Anglophone opponents (Aljazeera, 2019). The absence of a mediator ensured that the MND would remain an internal affair of the Cameroonian state, conducted on its own terms and for its own purposes (Aljazeera, 2019). The MND was a meticulously choreographed performance for both domestic and international audiences (Aljazeera, 2019). The government's actions of hand-picking delegates, pre-determining the agenda, and rejecting external mediation were not procedural mistakes but deliberate choices designed to project an image of a state committed to peace while simultaneously controlling the narrative and outcome (International Crisis Group, 2023). The release of political prisoners like Maurice Kamto was a prime example of a public relations tactic rather than a genuine shift in policy (Nchongayi, 2024). The performative nature of the dialogue is its most profound flaw. It denied the Anglophone need for participation and recognition, reinforcing the very mistrust that fuels the conflict (Achu and Tutumlu, 2023).

As such, the table below highlights how the MND deviated from peacebuilding principles that eventually caused its failure to implement peacebuilding and conflict resolution for the Anglophone Crisis IN Cameroon

**Table 1:** Deviations of the Major National Dialogue (MND) from Key Peacebuilding Principles

Peacebuilding Principle	Description of Principle	How the MND Deviated from This Principle
Inclusivity	A lasting peace can only be made with all key belligerents and stakeholders, ensuring legitimacy and buy-in.	The government deliberately excluded the leadership of armed separatist movements, who were the primary protagonists, as well as key diaspora leaders and civil society figures
Neutrality	The process should be convened and facilitated by a neutral third party to build trust and level the playing field between unequal parties.	The dialogue was a top-down, state-controlled process chaired by the Prime Minister. The government consistently rejected offers of international and regional mediation.
Open Agenda	Discussions should be open to all core grievances and demands, without preconditions or "red lines"	The government established a non-negotiable precondition: the "oneness and indivisibility" of the state was not up for discussion, thereby ruling out federalism or secession

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

The Major National Dialogue (MND) failed to adhere to fundamental peacebuilding principles. It violated the principle of inclusivity by deliberately excluding key stakeholders, including armed separatist leaders. The process also lacked neutrality, as it was a state-controlled dialogue led by the Prime Minister, with the government rejecting all offers of third-party mediation. Finally, it did not have an open agenda, because the government imposed a precondition that the "oneness and indivisibility" of the state was non-negotiable, which shut down discussions on core grievances related to federalism or secession.

## 5. THE “SPECIAL STATUS”: A FAÇADE OF RESOLUTION AND A TOOL OF CONTINUED CONTROL

The dialogue’s main outcome was the recommendation for a “special status” for the Anglophone regions, a proposal later codified into Law No. 2019/024 of December 24, 2019 ([Fombad, 2025](#)). This statute conferred extra powers to the North-West and South-West regions, especially regarding the Anglophone educational system and Common Law sub-system ([Tambe, 2024](#)). The legislature also conferred the creation of a bicameral Regional Assembly in each Anglophone region which included a House of Chiefs and a House of Regional Representatives ([Fombad, 2025](#)). However, these positions have no oversight and are answerable to the President. The government lauded these actions as crucial steps toward decentralization and a response to the “deeply held aspirations” of the Anglophone population ([Fuh, 2024](#)).

A critical assessment of the framework reveals that despite the government's claims of success, the “special status” was widely criticized and viewed as a token gesture that carries no actual powers and lacks the capacity to address the core grievances of the conflict ([Fombad, 2025](#)). This enactment is perceived as “symbolic politics” or “pseudo-decentralization”, creating an illusion of change without conferring any actual powers ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). A critical analysis reveals the following shortcomings:

- **Continued Central Control:** The new regional assemblies lack any influential capacity and oversight because they are controlled by centrally appointed governors from the capital, Yaoundé, who hold veto mandates over their decisions. This ensures the maintenance of ultimate authority with the central government, reinforcing the very power imbalance that fuels the conflict ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)).
- **Lack of Legitimacy:** The lack of inclusivity in consultations created a law that is biased. This piece of legislation was enacted without consulting key Anglophone leaders or separatist activists, which guaranteed its rejection by the very communities it was meant to serve ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)).
- **Insufficient Autonomy:** Furthermore, the legislation failed to consider crucial conditions. The provisions failed to address the demands for federalism or secession which is perceived as a lack of genuine devolution of power ([Fombad, 2025](#)). Instead, the law reinforces the central government's authority while exacerbating the already egregious power imbalance and maintaining the existing structure of domination ([Fox and Gittleman, 2020](#)).

The provision of superficial measures by the Cameroonian government when addressing Anglophone grievances is not a novel position/ In fact it is a recurrent strategy that can be traced back to 1972 when the federal system was abolished ([USCRI, 2025](#)). The “special status” illustrates a profound contradiction coming from the government’s stated goal of “solving the crisis”. The MND’s goals are incompatible with its outcomes and actions. The resulting special status framework is designed to reinforce the very power imbalances that created the crisis in the first place ([Fombad, 2025](#)). The fact that the MND’s main outcome was a non-solution reinforces the paper’s central thesis that it was a calculated failure.

## 6. POST-DIALOGUE DYNAMICS: THE INTENSIFICATION OF VIOLENCE AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The MND’s failure was immediately followed by a devastating intensification of violence and human rights abuses across the Anglophone regions ([Achu, 2025](#)). Reports from international organizations and human rights groups confirm a surge in atrocities committed by both government forces and armed separatist groups ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)).

The state's counter-insurgency operations have often failed to protect civilians and have resulted in extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and torture ([Achu, 2023](#)). Meanwhile, separatist fighters have continued to target civilians through abductions, kidnappings, and killings, often enforcing lockdowns and school boycotts ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)). The post-MND intensification of violence was not a new phase of the conflict but the logical consequence of the dialogue's failure ([Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025](#)). By offering a non-solution, the government signalled to separatists that dialogue was futile, leaving armed struggle as the only viable option.

Furthermore, the failure of the MND and the subsequent escalation of fighting have led to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and other humanitarian reports paint a grim picture:

- **Displacement:** As of late 2024 and early 2025, over a million people have been displaced by the conflict, with more than 900,000 internally displaced and over 60,000 having fled to Nigeria ([USCRI, 2025](#)).
- **Fatalities:** At least 6,000 civilians have been killed by both sides since the crisis began in 2016 ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)).
- **Targeted Infrastructure:** The conflict has seen the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure. Separatists have imposed a school boycott, causing at least 2,245 schools to be non-functional and affecting over 700,000 children ([ACAPS, 2021](#)). Health facilities and humanitarian workers have also been attacked by both sides, restricting access to vital aid and forcing international organizations to suspend operations ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)).
- **Ghost Towns:** Separatist groups have continued to enforce "ghost town" operations, or ad-hoc lockdowns, which severely disrupt daily life and cripple the local economy ([Shaban, 2024](#)).

The targeting of schools and healthcare facilities demonstrates a complete breakdown of trust and the absence of any shared social contract ([Bishop, 2024](#); [ACAPS, 2021](#)). This is a deliberate tactic to cripple the Anglophone regions and is the logical outcome of a failed peace process.

The MND's failure to engage with the leadership of the separatist movement, particularly after the imprisonment of figures like Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, has created a fragmented and increasingly disorganized armed resistance ([Fon et al., 2022](#)). The leadership vacuum and the lack of a unified front have led to internecine conflicts between rival armed groups ([Bone, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the conflict has become increasingly financially lucrative for some factions, which have expanded their sources of revenue through kidnapping and extortion ([ACLED, 2024](#)). The financialization of the conflict and the fragmentation of the armed groups are not just coincidental developments but direct outcomes of the government's strategy of delegitimizing and isolating the movement's political leadership. This has created a more complex, anarchic, and dangerous environment for civilians.

**Table 2:** The Humanitarian and Human Cost of the Post-MND Conflict

Metric	Pre-MND Figure (or trend)	Post-MND Figure (or trend)
Total Fatalities	Around 3,000 killed by September 2019.	At least 6,000 civilians killed by 2024.
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	Over 400,000 by early 2019.	Over 900,000 by early 2024.
Refugees	Over 30,000 by early 2019.	Over 60,000 fled to Nigeria by 2024.
Schools Closed	80% of schools were closed in Anglophone regions by mid-2019, affecting 600,000 children.	At least 2,245 schools are non-functional by 2024.

Source: Author’s compilation (2025)

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: CHARTING A PATH TOWARD POSITIVE PEACE

The 2019 Major National Dialogue was a monumental failure and a costly, missed opportunity that not only failed to resolve the Anglophone Crisis but, by raising and then dashing hopes, arguably contributed to the deepening of mistrust and the protraction of the conflict ([Nchongayi, 2024b](#)). This paper has argued that its failure was preordained by a design that prioritized state control over genuine dialogue, conflict management over conflict resolution, and a superficial negative peace over a just and sustainable positive peace ([Galtung, 1969](#)). By excluding key actors, restricting the agenda, and refusing neutral mediation, the Cameroonian government orchestrated a process that systematically violated the core tenets of peacebuilding and frustrated the fundamental human needs of its Anglophone citizens for identity, recognition, and participation ([Burton, 1990](#)).

The path to a lasting peace in Cameroon requires a complete departure from the flawed model of the MND. A genuine peace process is still possible, but it must be built on the foundation of internationally recognized principles of conflict resolution ([Nchongayi, 2024](#)). Based on the analysis in this paper, the following recommendations are essential for any future initiative:

- Commitment to a New, Genuinely Inclusive Dialogue:** The government and all stakeholders must commit to a new, credible peace process. This process must be fundamentally inclusive, ensuring the direct participation of the leadership of all major separatist movements, influential diaspora groups, and independent Anglophone civil society leaders ([Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025](#); [Nchongayi, 2024](#)).
- Third-Party International Mediation:** A new dialogue must be convened and facilitated by a neutral and credible third-party mediator or a consortium of mediators such as the African Union, the United Nations, or a respected state actor ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). This is non-negotiable for building the trust necessary to bring all parties to the table and ensure a fair process ([Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025](#)). The dialogue should be held in a neutral country to guarantee the security of all participants ([Nchongayi, 2024](#)).
- An Open Agenda with No Preconditions:** The agenda for any future talks must be open, with no red lines. All options for the form of the state, from a reformed unitary state and effective decentralization to federalism and secession, must be open for discussion ([Nchongayi, 2024c](#)). Only by allowing all grievances and aspirations to be aired can a mutually acceptable and sustainable solution be negotiated.

- **Immediate Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs):** To create a conducive environment for dialogue, the government must implement significant CBMs (Mason and Siegfried, 2013). These should include the release of all political prisoners associated with the crisis, a humanitarian truce, the demilitarization of the Anglophone regions, and the establishment of a mechanism to address human rights abuses committed by all sides.
- **Focus on Positive Peace:** The ultimate goal of the peace process must be the establishment of positive peace (Galtung and Fischer, 2013). This requires moving beyond a ceasefire to a comprehensive settlement that addresses the structural roots of the conflict. This will involve constitutional reforms, equitable resource sharing, guarantees for cultural and linguistic rights, and transitional justice mechanisms to address past atrocities and promote reconciliation.

The Anglophone Crisis is a political problem born of historical grievances and structural injustice. It demands a political solution rooted in genuine dialogue, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to building a new future. The failure of the Major National Dialogue serves as a stark and painful lesson illustrating the universally held understanding that there are no shortcuts to peace.

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