

# The Dismantling of the Cameroon Federation in 1972: The Petroleum Factor

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## **Abstract**

*In 1972, the boundary between the federated states of West and East Cameroon disappeared as Ahidjo dismantled the Cameroon Federation established in 1961 in favour of a Unitary State. Although the dissolution of the federation was expected at any time after 1961, this paper argue that the main factor that precipitated the "death" of the federation was the discovery of petroleum in West Cameroon and Ahidjo's determination to take total control of this new source of wealth and prevent West Cameroon from waging a war of secession as was the case with the Katanga Province in the Congo and Biafra in Nigeria. The elimination of the boundary between West and East Cameroon in 1972 and the change of the name of the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon in 1984 were all intended to wipe out the surviving identity of West Cameroon, the traces of federalism and hopefully prevent secessionist tendencies. The study depended on both the rich primary and secondary sources that exist on the politics of post-independence Cameroon.*

**Key Words:** Petroleum, Federation, Unitary State, Secession, West Cameroon, East Cameroon.

## **Background**

In 1916, Anglo-French forces that defeated Germany in Cameroon during the First World War, partitioned Cameroon into two; British Cameroons and French Cameroon. In the Partition, France received four-fifths and Britain the remaining one-fifth. When the war ended, the international community recognised the partition and requested Britain and France to administer their respective portions as mandate territories of the League of nations. The

new international boundary or partition line came to be called the Oliphant-Picot line in honour of Lancelot Oliphant, a British diplomat and George Picot a French diplomat who in a meeting in London in February 1916, initiated the partition by drawing a line on the map of Cameroon from Lake Chad to the Mungo River. The partition was finalised by the Milner-Simon Agreement of July 10, 1919.

The Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon gained additional international status when Britain further partitioned British Cameroons into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons and integrated the two portions into Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria respectively. In fact from 1922, the Oliphant-Picot line became the boundary between British Nigeria and French Cameroon because British Southern and British Northern Cameroons were an integral part of the British colony of Nigeria.

The Southern Cameroons was administered from Lagos from 1922 to 1946 and from Enugu, capital of Eastern Nigeria from 1946 to 1958 when the territory was granted some autonomy. During this period, the territory was treated as a Nigerian colony. Its colonial public services (Education, Health, Public Works Department, Judiciary, Post and Telecommunication) were manned largely by Nigerians who also dominated trade, transport, plantations and other sectors of the economy. The territory was also neglected as there were no roads, railways, schools, electricity or pipe borne water for the indigenes. In fact attempts were made by the Nigerian officials and the large number of Igbo immigrants in the Southern Cameroons to annex or colonise the territory and exploit its resources (Nfi,2015).

It was with this background that the nationalists in the Southern Cameroons led by John Ngu Foncha advocated separation from Nigeria and eventual reunification with French Cameroon. In 1953, the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) was formed as the first indigenous party in the Southern Cameroons with the reunification of British and French Cameroons as its objective. When the KNC deviated from this objective, Foncha founded the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) in 1955 to champion the course of reunification. That same year, 1955, the *Union des Population du Cameroun* (UPC) a pro-reunification party in French Cameroon moved its headquarters to Kumba in the Southern Cameroon following a ban placed on the party by the French authorities in July 1955. The KNDP and the UPC (when the activities of the UPC was banned in 1957, its Southern Cameroon followers founded One Kamerun,(OK) under Ndeh Ntumazah to continue with the struggle for reunification) were therefore the political forces in favour of reunification in the Southern Cameroons.

Despite the Igbo domination of socio-economic life in the Southern Cameroons and the British neglect of the economy of the territory, some nationalists were still for independence with Nigeria. This was the case with E M L Endeley and N N Mbile who merged their political parties in 1960 to create the Cameroon People's National Convention (CPNC) a pro-Nigerian political party (Nfi,2014:238). Others, led by PM Kale wanted a separate Cameroon State without links with either French Cameroons or Nigeria. It was due to this division amongst the nationalists that the United Nations organised a plebiscite in the British Southern Cameroons in February 1961. The electorates were to choose between independence with Nigeria and reunification with French Cameroons. Out of 332,665 votes cast, 233,571 voted for reunification with French Cameroon and 97,741 voted for union with Nigeria (Ebune,1992:230) The majority under the leadership of J N Foncha therefore opted for

reunification with French Cameroon or the Republic of Cameroon as the territory was known at independence from 1960. The reunified Cameroon was a federation styled the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

### **The Nature of the Federation**

The shape that the Cameroon Federation took in 1961 was in fact the outcome of negotiations and a compromise between the centralist ambitions of Ahidjo and the federalists from the Southern Cameroons. Before the constitutional talks proper, Ahidjo had made several declarations in Tiko, Victoria and Buea in July 1960 insinuating that reunification will not be annexation or the assimilation of the Southern Cameroons by the Republic of Cameroon. According to him, reunification was to be undertaken in an atmosphere of equality between the representatives of the Republic of Cameroon and the Southern Cameroons. (Nfi, 2014:267) It was with these promises in mind that the Southern Cameroon delegation after a preliminary or preparatory meeting in Bamenda in June 1961, travelled to Foumban for the Constitutional Conference of July 1961 scheduled by Ahidjo, president of the Republic of Cameroon. It was at this conference that the structure of federation was crafted.

Essentially, the Federal Republic of Cameroon was a centralised two-state federation (West and East Cameroon) under an executive President assisted by a Vice President. The president and his vice were elected by universal suffrage for a mandate of five years renewal. The President and his vice could not come from the same state. The President had too much powers as he appointed and dismissed all federal and states officials including the Prime Ministers of West and East Cameroon. In fact his powers were not limited and the Vice President was not given any specific functions as the constitution merely stated that the Vice President's duty was to assist the President who might delegate responsibilities to him by decree. Yaounde was to serve as the federal capital and the headquarters of East Cameroon while Buea was the capital of the state of West Cameroon.

The legislature consisted of a Federal House of Assembly, the East Cameroon House of Assembly, the West Cameroon House of Assembly and the West Cameroon House of Chiefs. The constitution specified that a bill passed by the Federal House of Assembly would be adopted only when a majority of the deputies of each of the federated states assemblies voted for it. This measure was intended to obstruct any attempt to revise the Federal Constitution to the disadvantage of any of the states.

Although the Foumban compromise apparently satisfied both Ahidjo and Foncha, leaders of the two delegations, the grave of the federation was also dug at Foumban. Ahidjo knew very little about the functioning of the federal system of government. He accepted it just to please Foncha and his delegation who came to Foumban convinced that only a loose federation or a confederation under a ceremonial President with executive Prime Ministers heading the federated states was the best form of union.. Ahidjo like his French advisers at Foumban believed in a centralised form of government and was determined to move as rapidly as possible towards the creation of a unitary state. It was for this reason that he carefully added a paragraph to the French and authentic version of the constitution which indicated that the federation was an experiment and a temporal measure. Articles five and six which gave the central government broad powers were also already preparing the stage for a unilateral abrogation of the Foumban accord.

Again, the conference did not settle on the nature of revenue allocation between the two states. West Cameroon was to give up its sources of customs and other revenue and was to be financed by the federal subvention until a formula could be fixed. Such a formula was never fixed and West Cameroon continued to be economically dependent on the federal purse. This was not for nothing. Ahidjo wanted the economy of West Cameroon paralysed so that when ever his call for a unitary state was made, many people in West Cameroon may accept it out of frustration. The economic frustration was not long to come. In the 1966/67 financial year, West Cameroon obtained 70 percent of its budget from the Federal Government in the form of subventions (Ngoh,2004:147). In a confidential letter to President Ahidjo, Prime Minister Jua requested for a loan of 500 million Francs in September 1967. In 1968, the new Prime Minister S.T.Muna asked for another loan of 150 million, an indication that West Cameroon could not survive without the centre.(Ngoh,2004:150)

Apart from the constitutional lapses that rendered the 1961 federation vulnerable, Ahidjo was a dictator drunk with power and could not tolerate rivalry from the Prime Ministers of the federated states or from the leaders of other political parties. In September 1966, he therefore coerced Foncha, Muna and Endeley to dissolve their political parties and join Ahidjo's *Union Camerounaise* (UC) to form the Cameroon National Union (CNU) as the single party. Still in 1966, he used the Bakossi-Bamileke War in Tombel to buttress his argument in favour of the consolidation of national unity through the unitary state. Ahidjo also complained of the duplication of services between the institutions of the Federation and those of the Federated States and the high cost involved in running four assemblies and three government by a country that was very underdeveloped. All these were window dressing arguments. The dismantling of the federation was certainly in his agenda since 1961 but what precipitated it was the discovery of petroleum in West Cameroon and the probability that the Federal Government and East Cameroon may become dependent on the hitherto considered barren West Cameroon.

### **The Petroleum Factor**

The history of oil exploration in Cameroon dates back to 1947 when the French Office of Oil Research began the area's first exploration campaign. In the 1950s crude oil prospecting was started by a French exploration company, Elf-Aquitaine and was continued by its local subsidiary Elf-SEREPCA. In fact the *Société Nationale* Elf-Aquitaine (SNEA) was the first corporation to explore for petroleum resources in Cameroon around 1951. During the first eight years (1951-1959) exploration activities were limited to on-shore areas and it was not commercially viable. After several unsuccessful attempts, attention was directed to off-shore prospecting in 1963. Here too success was slow. It took almost a decade for Elf-SEREPCA to produce any convincing evidence that there were indeed oil reserves in Cameroon. Elf SEREPCA spotted 21 areas and the company's preliminary estimates suggested that the largest oil fields contained as much as 1.5 million tons of oil a year, which was sufficient for Cameroon's internal consumption then (Ngenge, 2003:77) In 1972, the first Cameroonian oil was brought to the surface at a place called Bétika, in the basin of Rio Del-Rey in the Southwest of Cameroon, almost at the Nigerian frontier (Bikas C.Sanyal et al., 1990:35)

As Anyangwe (2009:182) rightly states, it is extremely unlikely that the British did not know of the existence of petroleum in the Rio Del-Rey and Bakassi Peninsulas in the Southern

Cameroons. By 1959 Nigeria was known to have commercial quantities of hydrocarbon reserves in the "Bight of Biafra", a geographical area that includes the coastal stretches of the Southern Cameroons. The British Petroleum Company, BP, was very active drilling oil in the Nigerian delta area abutting on the Southern Cameroon's Bakassi and Rio Del-Rey maritime areas. The British could not therefore have been unaware of oil reserves offshore in British Southern Cameroons. Instead all British sponsored economic reports on the Southern Cameroons like the Phillipson's Report of 1959 gave the impression that the territory was not viable and could not survive as an independent entity. This report produced by a commission chaired by Sir Sydney Phillipson went ahead to describe the economy of Southern Cameroon as a hand-to-mouth economy.(Ngoh,2002:253) The so-called non-viability of the British Southern Cameroons was intended to destroy the chances of Southern Cameroon gaining independence as a separate state and to fortify the British-cherished union between the Southern Cameroons and oil rich Nigeria. The British authorities wanted the Southern Cameroons to gain independence with Nigeria and therefore propagated the false information that the territory was poor and could not survive on its resources This misinformation and disinformation about the "economic viability" of the Southern Cameroon, weakened the bargaining power of the Southern Cameroons at the Fouban Constitutional Conference as Ahidjo himself was worried about the economic and financial consequences of reunification (Torrent,2012:31). This misinformation finally worked in favour of Ahidjo

It was not therefore a coincidence that 1972 marked the dismantling of the federation and the elimination of the boundary between West and East Cameroon and the first ever flow of petroleum in the Ndian area of West Cameroon. When the French explorers indicated in 1964 that the petroleum indicators in West Cameroon were positive, Ahidjo immediately conceived but kept secret his plans for the unitary state. His French advisers and neo-colonialists insisted on the unitary state so as to ensure that the oil in West Cameroon was directly under Ahidjo and at the service of France. The elimination of the boundary between West and East Cameroon was therefore a neo-colonial project intended to guarantee French control over petroleum in Cameroon. The federation therefore had to be dismantled as early as 1972, before the news of the petroleum boom became widespread in West Cameroon.

Besides, Ahidjo knew that the loyalty of the West Cameroon officials to the federal institutions and to his person was determined largely by the disastrous financial situation of West Cameroon. For example, Prime Minister Jua known for his position in favour of strong and autonomous federated states pleaded with Ahidjo in 1967 to provide financial assistance for socio-economic projects in West Cameroon (Ngoh,2004:150). With the advent of petroleum, the financial dependence of West Cameroon on the federal purse was certainly going to disappear and consequently the loyalty of West Cameroonians to the central administration. Ahidjo could not therefore afford to maintain the federation and the divide between West and East Cameroon.

Events in neighbouring Congo and Nigeria also convinced Ahidjo that the West Cameroon petroleum may divide the federation along the existing boundaries. The civil war and secession crisis in the Congo in the 1960s was caused by the mineral wealth of Katanga and the determination of the Katangese to separate from the Congo Federation and monopolise their wealth. In Nigeria, it was the oil-rich Igbo land that declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra because the Igbo wanted to exclude the rest of Nigeria from the

exploitation of petroleum in their region. Ahidjo therefore saw petroleum as a factor of division and decided to eliminate the boundary between West and East Cameroon out of fear of a possible war of secession. The geographical proximity and historical connections between the seceding Republic of Biafra (Eastern Nigeria) and West Cameroon were such that the autonomous tendencies in Biafra could easily spread to and be copied in West Cameroon. Again when Foncha the Vice President represented President Ahidjo in an international conference in Gabon in 1970, he offered 500,000 thousands from his private coffers to the Igbo immigrants in Libreville knowing very well that Ahidjo had resisted pressure from the French President Charles de Gaulle to assist Biafra or the Igbo in their war of secession. This gesture was seen by Ahidjo as Foncha's sympathy with the Igbo secessionists and Foncha was immediately dismissed through a presidential decree and S.T.Muna was appointed as the new Vice President. The abolition of the Federation became inevitable as Ahidjo feared a possible Biafra-West Cameroon alliance given that the Igbo leader had already declared his intension to invade Cameroon after the independence of Biafra.

Ahidjo's fears were legitimate given that on the eve of the 1972 constitutional reform, there were rumours circulating that some West Cameroon politicians and businessmen were importing weapons from West Germany with the intension of destabilising the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Ngoh, 2004:159). This rumour profited Ahidjo who knew very well that the rumour was part of the political infighting within and without the KNDP in West Cameroon. He did not hesitate to attribute the alleged destabilisation or division of Cameroon to the expected petroleum boom in West Cameroon.

What makes the petroleum factor more plausible was the rumour that surrounded the building of an oil refinery. Ahidjo secretly planned to construct the oil refinery in Douala or Kribi for crude oil to be transported through a pipe line from the West Cameroon coast to Douala or Kribi in East Cameroon. This was intended to eliminate the feeling in West Cameroon that the new found oil was a West Cameroon asset. Again in case of secession, the huge refinery investments were to remain in East Cameroon. However, the refinery was finally constructed in Victoria due to pressure from the Anglophones and particularly Dr E.M.L. Endeley who was the CNU Section President for Fako. Endeley threatened to have the pipes carrying crude oil to Douala or Kribi for refining blown up. (Mukong, 1990:40) As a CNU President and an influential figure in Anglophone Cameroon Ahidjo decided to yield to Endeley's demands since he (Ahidjo) was facing the Presidential elections of 1975 (Ngenge, 2003:78). Construction work started in 1978 and in 1981 President Ahidjo travelled to Victoria to inaugurate the National Oil Refinery complex. However, the management of the refinery remained in the hands of Francophones from the former East Cameroon as Ahidjo probably feared that an Anglophone manager of the National Oil Refinery (SONARA) could use the resources to sponsor secession. His successor President Biya continued with this practice and all the General Managers of SONARA have come from Francophone Cameroon.

Apart from the attempt to refine the oil in Douala, Ahidjo also attempted to completely wipe out the boundary between West and East Cameroon from the memories of the people and facilitate oil exploitation by re-dividing the United Republic of Cameroon into five provinces away from the seven provinces of 1972. In the planned administrative reform, the North West Province, part of former West Cameroon was to be merged with the West Province part of

former East Cameroon and the Southwest Province part of former West Cameroon merged with the Littoral Province of East Cameroon. This planned reform was also resisted by the Northwest and Southwest CNU elite. Ahidjo and his Minister of Territorial Administration, Ayissi Mvodo had to drop the plan.(Ngenge,78). In 1984, the new President of Cameroon Paul Biya who had served Ahidjo as Permanent Secretary at the Presidency and Prime Minister since 1975 and who was part of the scheme to abolish the boundary between West and East Cameroon eliminated the last traces of federalism when he changed the name of the country by decree. The United Republic of Cameroon became the Republic of Cameroon. The oil wealth of former West Cameroon was the factor behind this struggle for national unity and national integration in Cameroon as petroleum resources were at the origin of many civil wars and secessionists movements threatening the territorial integrity of many states in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Conclusion**

The 1972 dismantling of the federal system of government was certainly the most significant post independence reform effected in Cameroon.. The reform eliminated the 1916 territorial boundary between British Southern Cameroons and French administered Cameroon which later in 1961 became West and East Cameroon respectively. Several political and economic arguments were advanced to justify the 1972 "revolution". The most publicised and most pronounced by Ahidjo were the economic arguments especially the high cost of running the federation with its three governments and four assemblies. This paper presents the important role played by the discovery of crude oil in West Cameroon in precipitating the abolition of the federation in favour of a unitary state. Ahidjo's political ambitions were far above economic considerations in dismantling the federation. With the first flow of petroleum in West Cameroon in 1972, the 1916 boundary between the two Cameroons became obsolete and unnecessary according to Ahidjo. The oil revenue could produce secessionists tendencies along the existing boundary between West and East Cameroon as was the case with oil wealth elsewhere in Africa especially neighbouring Nigeria. The abolition of the boundary between West and East Cameroon in 1972 was therefore intended to keep Cameroon united at a time when West Cameroon could secede from the federation because of its new oil wealth. This objective fitted squarely in Ahidjo's grand desire, that of establishing a centralised and totalitarian regime in Cameroon.

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