


Slow Dissent and Worldmaking beyond Imperial Relations in “Kamer-amère” (Bitter Cameroon)

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Working in the subfields of postcolonial geographies of responsibility and Black and African Geographies, my analysis centers on Cameroonian political resistance and practices of worldmaking. From January 2016 to August 2023, political activists experienced a set of difficulties: A wariness and oftentimes hostility to France’s continued support for the authoritarian state, dismissals by state representatives that dissenters were “externally supported,” and misappropriations of the anti-imperial mantle by government representatives. Over the preceding several decades, the state fostered a political environment antagonistic toward Cameroonians of the diaspora, and this was instrumentalized in the widespread dismissal of activists as foreign, foreign-backed, or foreign-influenced. Activists were hesitant but sometimes strategically prepared to call upon transnational groups for attention and political action against repression and violence in Cameroon. In the context of the state’s appropriation of an anti-imperialist ideology, I argue that transnational solidarities must be attuned to and integrated with local politics in Cameroon. Making sense of popular debates regarding (anti)imperialism, (anti)intervention, and transnational solidarity in conditions of authoritarianism matters for political debates across the African continent.

En este artículo llevamos a cabo un análisis de la resistencia política camerunesa y de sus prácticas de creación del mundo. Para ello, hemos trabajado en los subcampos de las geografías poscoloniales de la responsabilidad y de las geografías negras y africanas. Entre enero de 2016 y agosto de 2023, los activistas políticos experimentaron una serie de dificultades: desconfianza y, a menudo, hostilidad hacia el continuo apoyo por parte de Francia al Estado autoritario, rechazos por parte de los representantes del Estado de que los disidentes fueran «apoyados desde el exterior» y apropiaciones indebidas del manto antiimperialista por parte de representantes del Gobierno. Durante las décadas anteriores, el Estado fomentó un entorno político antagonístico hacia los cameruneses de la diáspora, y esto se instrumentalizó mediante el rechazo generalizado de los activistas como si estos fueran extranjeros o estuvieran apoyados o influenciados por el exterior. Los activistas tenían dudas, pero a veces estaban estratégicamente preparados para pedir a los grupos transnacionales que prestaran atención y que tomaran medidas políticas contra la represión y la violencia en Camerún. Argumentamos, en el contexto de la apropiación por parte del Estado de una ideología antiimperialista, que las solidaridades transnacionales deben estar en sintonía e integradas con la política local en Camerún. Es importante poder dotar de sentido a los debates populares sobre el (anti)imperialismo, la (anti)intervención y la solidaridad transnacional en condiciones de autoritarismo de cara a los debates políticos en todo el continente africano.

Dans le cadre des sous-champs des géographies postcoloniales de responsabilité et des géographies noires et africaines, mon analyse est centrée sur la résistance politique et les pratiques de conception du monde camerounaises. Entre janvier 2016 et août 2023, les militants politiques ont connu un ensemble de difficultés : une méfiance et souvent, une hostilité vis-à-vis de la France et de son soutien à l’État autoritaire, des représentants de l’État qui rejettent l’idée que les dissidents puissent bénéficier d’un soutien externe, et le détournement du rôle anti-impérial par les représentants du gouvernement. Les décennies précédentes, l’État encourageait un environnement politique antagoniste aux Camerounais appartenant à la diaspora. Ce comportement a été instrumentalisé dans le rejet généralisé des activistes au titre qu’ils fussent étrangers, soutenus par des acteurs étrangers ou influencés par ceux-ci. Bien qu’ils y fussent parfois préparés, les militants hésitaient à faire appel à des groupes transnationaux pour attirer l’attention et mener des actions politiques à l’encontre de la répression et de la violence au Cameroun. Dans le contexte de l’appropriation étatique d’une idéologie anti-impérialiste, nous affirmons que les solidarités transnationales doivent être adaptées à la politique locale du Cameroun et intégrées à celle-ci. La compréhension des débats populaires concernant l’(anti)-impérialisme, l’(anti)-intervention et la solidarité transnationale face à l’autoritarisme s’avère importante pour les débats politiques sur le continent africain.

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Introduction

This article is concerned with contemporary encounters and dialectics between political activists and the state (and its representatives) in Cameroon. I argue that we have seen shifts in the mobilizations of activists in the last five years, as activists organize and resist within conditions of authoritarian neoimperial governance and changing international geopolitics. Activists transnationalized their struggles and refined their articulation of political possibilities and solidarities. The transnationalization of political resistance opened new spaces for resistance beyond the reach of authoritarian violence. At the same time, activists fostering Pan-African and Pan-Cameroonian solidarities across borders confronted heterogeneous frictions of class, mobility, gender, sexuality, and language. In their practices of strategic dialogue, learning, and sharing across difference and against imperialism, activists practiced what Gayatri Spivak (1999, 402) calls “transnational literacy”—a kind of activist praxis that is realized in practice through encounters, relations, discomfort, and difference between differently marginalized peoples. There is, therefore, a “burden of [or within] transnationality” (Spivak 1999, 401) to destabilize hierarchies, as the struggles of marginalized peoples are situated as illegible, obscured, and erased. Working within Black and African Geographies, my analysis of Cameroonian resistance is attentive to the *longue durée* of dissent within authoritarian contexts. That is to say, moments and spaces of resistance overlap, echo, reverberate, and ebb and flow over time. I mobilize the concept of “slow dissent” to attend to this complex spatial-temporal interplay and to center people’s own senses of life, power, and social relations in ways that are quietly empowering and generative of emergent worldbuilding.

I take inspiration from Adom Getachew’s (2019, 2) notion of anticolonial “worldmaking” as an orientation and ambition far larger than self-determination or political and economic sovereignty. Worldmaking is an aspiration that entails the dismantling of imperial relations and the reconstitution of global structures of power. As such, a “point of departure [is] that resistance or social change cannot be understood in isolation from power” (Tafon and Saunders 2015, 321). Activists are creative, inventive, and audacious in their practices of political worldmaking, fostering networks of support, seeking to influence public opinion, and drawing attention to the disappointments and malfunctioning of the government. Activists seek to rethink the future collectively and boldly, often with a prioritization of outing entrenched networks of political power and patronage (what has been called “*dégagisme*”), but with aspirations for fundamental political and structural change. A component of the latter is what Ndiaye (2023, 275) calls “preemptive activism.” Preemptive resistance refers to the ways in which activists “engage in protest to prevent autocratic excesses before they even take place” (Ndiaye 2023), and is an important component of the longer processes of resistance and dissent for worldmaking, as I discuss below.

In Cameroon, political activists faced challenging dialectics: Being dismissed by the state as “traitors” (with material, financial, and/or ideological support from foreign and international entities) and being hesitant but sometimes strategically prepared to call upon international actors, all the while being wary and hostile to French interference, France’s continued support for the authoritarian state, and top-down processes of political change. Transnational solidarities can support in-country activists through knowledge sharing, the mobilization of digital platforms for the creation of counter-discourses and the subversion or

disruption of dominant discourses (Kojoué 2022), fundraising and material or technological contributions for movement aims, and careful and purposeful risk-taking in authoritarian contexts in which “bodies and their expressions are strongly controlled” (Kojoué 2022) and activists encounter unlawful detention, imprisonment, expulsion, and violence (Malaquais 2001; Kamga and Emmanuel 2019; Lekunze 2019; Modzom 2019). Yet, such solidarities and virtual communities (and the technologies they often rely upon) also expose inequalities and social hierarchies (Mutsaers and Karam 2018) and open up novel and unevenly experienced forms of violence (targeting, harassment, doxing, censorship, etc.) and surveillance, with women, queer, and trans people more likely to experience these exclusions and oppressions (Kojoué 2022; Ndengue et al. 2023). Transnational solidarities can reify vertical relations by privileging the objectives of more powerful transnational or international activists, compel activists organizing within Cameroon to abridge, simplify, or alter their experiences (and the language through which they are expressed) for an international audience, foster colonial tendencies of “saviorhood” that disempower activists on the ground, and create new justifications for the hegemonic dismissal of dissent.

Amidst an upsurge in resistance movements in and beyond the borders of Cameroon, the state sought to manage and control dissent through tactical evasion (particularly an invisibilization of the president, who is frequently absent from the public purview for months at a time), direct police and military violence, misinformation, and the reputational sabotage of activists. Over several decades, the state has systematically fostered a political environment hostile toward Cameroonians of the diaspora (Takougang 1993; Nyamnjoh 2005, 2010; Orock 2019; Ndengue et al. 2023), and this has been instrumentalized in the widespread (unsubstantiated) dismissal of activists as foreign, foreign-backed, or foreign-influenced. While spending millions of Central African Francs (CFA) each year on foreign public relations firms, the state staged select anti-imperial performances. Meanwhile, activists critique the state’s complicity within neoimperial geopolitics, including the willingness to sacrifice popular and intergenerational well-being for short-term personal financial gain (graft) by continuously permitting extractive and infrastructural projects with foreign corporations. These dialectics of neoimperialism are at the heart of my consideration of contemporary resistance. Making sense of activist and state debates regarding (anti)imperialism, (anti)intervention, and transnational solidarities in conditions of authoritarianism matters for political debates across the African continent, and indeed the world.

Black and African Geographies and Slow Dissent

In the last ten years, the capacious, multimodal, and interdisciplinary subfield of Black Geographies has powerfully refused the exclusion of Black voices and perspectives from geographical thought (e.g. Daley 2020; Noxolo 2022); evidenced the embedded relations between racism and capitalism (Matlon 2014; Al-Bulushi 2022); and asserted the need for more nuanced understandings of struggle and solidarity practices as place and space-specific (Hawthorne 2022). In the past several years, geographers have identified the provenance of Black Geographies out of struggle within US academia by Black geographers (Noxolo 2022, 1233). The subdiscipline has centered on the diverse, complex, and multidimensional experiences of Blackness in the diaspora, a project of considerable importance given the whiteness

of the discipline (Esson and Last 2020). However, this resulted in a temporary bifurcation of Black Geographies as distinct from African Geographies (Hawthorne 2019; Daley and Murrey 2022). Hawthorne (2019, 8), who works with African migrant communities in Italy, remarks that “there is much room for an engagement with the African continent, as well as the relationship between Africa and the wider Black diaspora, in Black geographies” (see also Daley and Murrey 2022).

One area of rich potential for cross-fertilization between Black Geographies and African Geographies is the insistence within Black Geographies to center the multiple spatialities of Black life and struggle. By looking closely at the pluriform spatialities of Black struggle, Hawthorne (2019) argues that “black matters are spatial matters.” Scholars decry the ways in which a predominant intellectual focus on destruction, violence, and death has analytically imprisoned academics and reaffirmed forms of epistemic violence (Tuck and Yang 2014; Murrey and Mollett 2023). Against the tendency to treat transnational alliances as singular or fixed, Camilla Hawthorne (2022) argues that heterogenous and creative Black Mediterranean diasporic politics show that another politics is possible. This orientation within Black Geographies demands African Geographies refuses the simplistic binary that has long characterized the field of African Studies: the polarization of thinking into “Afro-optimist” and “Afro-pessimist” camps.

In a 2021 keynote address, Hawthorne provokes scholars to address the “more capacious political formations that are not oriented on decent-based, identarian claims, but rather on shared political visions, intertwined histories of struggles and resistance, and nonlinear diasporic entanglements that disrupt state systems of categorisation” (cited in Carastathis 2022, 231). In the context of a geographical scholarship that has focused predominantly on the experiences of African migrants and diasporas, (Matlon 2020, 6) asserts the need for equivalent theoretical and intellectual engagements with African countries and communities as “site[s] for political agency or social change.” Within a geopolitical system positioned upon Eurocentric world views, “international”¹ actors are deemed to “have valuable political ideas and exercise meaningful political agency in the world” (Sabaratnam 2017; see also Pommerolle 2010). There is a risk of over-celebrating the moving topographies and creativities of transnational solidarities, particularly as they remain relatively more accessible to researchers based at institutions in Euro-America.

In this research, I respond to these provocations by centering aspirations, encounters, and multiple connections of the activists I know and work with based in Yaoundé, alongside those improvising networks of solidarity in Paris, London, and Washington D.C. Understanding solidarity politics demands an attention to both dissent and power. National and transnational struggles unfold within, while seeking to move beyond, the logics of global racial-spatial violence. Often, transnational solidarities are deeply integrated with local politics in Cameroon; as such, they must be read in tandem. These heterogeneous coalitions make up the beginnings of an emergent and insurgent world-making project; they are one component in a slow dissent against racial capitalism.

Scholars of resistance have encouraged us to pull back our frame of analysis to allow for a slowing down and open-

ing of collective expectations of resistance, including expectations regarding so-called “successful” resistance as characterized by speed and immediately visible change (Murrey 2019; see also Hughes et al. 2022). I use “slow dissent” to refer to the amalgamation of intergenerational, horizontal, often fragmentary practices and narratives of resistance within the *longue durée* of authoritarian racial capitalism and militarized counterrevolution (Murrey 2016). In the last decade in Cameroon, political resistance has included occasional dramatic episodes of highly visible solidarity, including the popular horizontal movement against the extension of presidential terms in 2008, movements against the marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians in 2015 and 2016, and the series of protests following the 2018 presidential elections, for example. These relatively rapid and dramatic moments of protest have been bookended with sustained, smaller-scale, alternately individual and collective resistance practices. These songs, acts, jokes, and everyday resistances make up a permanent underbelly of slow dissent (on grief and music in political struggle in Cameroon, see Budji 2019; Musah 2021). Slow dissent is often as physically and emotionally difficult and fatiguing as organized forms of resistance. “Against an onslaught of multidimensional structural violence, there is no one moment or one project that is the inauguration of resistance; rather, there is an emotionally saturated slow dissent—one that is punctuated with discontinuity and fracturing(s)—with the potential to exert pressures against systemic forces over time” (Murrey 2016, 226). As a theory, slow dissent recognizes the culmination of multiple simultaneous struggles and does not focus exclusively on one resistance agenda or objective.

Within the extended timeline of slow dissent, I trace recent shifts in resistance practices in the last five years. Resistance practices and occupations of transnational and national spaces, from January 2016 to August 2023, drew attention to the government’s cyclical patterns of violent state-making, hedged the state’s threat of aggression in response to dissent, and fostered an emergent politics of Pan-Cameroonian solidarity that challenged authoritarian (and colonial) divide-and-rule. Activist networks mobilizing for peace and political change navigated hyper-censored domestic spaces by strategically appealing for international attention, international sanctions, and transnational and international solidarities. Similarly, in research with queer and trans Cameroonians between 2017 and 2022, Larissa Kojoué notes (2022, 111) that “digital spaces make it possible to rediscover a certain agentivity” and foster “an alternative geography, allowing one to step outside of more normative terrains.” During this period, Cameroonian political activists deliberately platformed their public protests within transnational spaces and territories, including consulates abroad, international hotels, and online transnational forums. They often did so as expressions of dynamic worldmaking against an entangled menace of neoimperial intervention, global racial capitalism, and authoritarian political practice.

The Cameroonian state worked diligently (albeit sporadically and contradictorily) to foster a public persona of sovereign anti-imperialism, all the while engaging in strategic ploys to diffuse international pressure (Endong 2020) and concede to neocolonial capitalism, in particular, foreign-sponsored economic projects. The state’s selective admonishments of international actors as neoimperial or interventionist occurred alongside a demonization of dissidents. This dialectic is compounded with the simultaneous reluctance of international actors to get involved in meaningful ways. Foreign politicians tend to deliver superficial statements or engage in ineffective actions. Perfunctory

¹The “international community” is a title often misappropriated by Western interests to name themselves and make universal (seemingly unbiased and apolitical) claims.

foreign public statements have thus far been easily dismissed and often have shallow political significance, but they can act as political dog-whistles, bolstering the hegemonic argument that Cameroonian problems have “foreign origins.”

I draw from an expansive empirical dataset that reflects real-time research adaptations given the restrictions on travel in and out of the southwest and northwest regions of the country (which precludes extended fieldwork because of the extent of ongoing violence) and the need to navigate digital misinformation. I draw from in-person and digital conversations with Yaoundé-, Paris-, and London-based activists. Over five years, from 2018 to 2023, I visited Yaoundé seven times to conduct interviews and hold conversations with activists living in the city. Activists were university students, artists, entrepreneurs, comedians, vloggers, and more.² In addition, I work from long-term digital ethnographies (or #ethnographies) with activists online (Murrey 2023). I cull from a broad media ecology, including credible videos and text messages circulated on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter,³ and gray materials from media sources. I analyzed press releases from and interviews with members of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Communications, and various public speeches from President Paul Biya.

The Phantom President: State Violence and Invisibility

Paul Barthélemy Biya'a bi Mvondo has been president of Cameroon since the resignation of Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, in November 1982. On November 6, 2023, he quietly marked forty-one years in power. “The president is the head of the armed forces, the judiciary, the ruling party, and the state and also ... the ‘chief of chiefs’” (Lekunze & Page 2023, 225). Given the political and ideological prominence of the presidency, activists and social justice artists frequently position their struggle directly against President Biya. He has been described as the personification of power (Essomé 2014; Modzom 2019).

The Biya administration has survived successive waves of active political protest and resistance through entrenched networks of elite support and extensive patronage schemes (Albaugh 2011), a hyper-centralization of power (Kamga 2019),⁴ by remaining fickle with international partnerships (Pommerolle 2010), and through calculated public silence and inertia (Modzom 2019). In the last two decades of his rule, absence from the public sphere alongside cycles of open brutality have become central features in the maintenance of Biya's hegemony—this, even as autocratic leaders have been pushed from power elsewhere in North, Central, and West Africa through protest, conflict, and coups. Biya's monocratic endurance challenges the typecast of dictatorial states as tightly controlled networks of absolute power (see also Albaugh 2011), revealing an autocratic state that is concurrently markedly violent, vacant, feeble, and surreptitious.

Biya routinely goes months without any public appearances or statements. Activists refer to Biya as the “phantom

president” due to his pattern of extended and unexplained absences. Modzom (2019, 26) calls Biya a “flagrant paradox” in the scholarship on political communication, which has accentuated the importance of public spectacles in the maintenance of power. He writes that “despite all the theories consecrating the triumph of appearance in the conduct ... of political action, Biya's political career seems marked by an undeniable efficiency” (Modzom 2019, 26, my translation), despite the triple absence of the president, who is physically, visually, and discursively removed. These deliberate absences foster a cult of personality that perpetually re-center Biya in the public imaginary.

As a result of his periodic nonappearances, *le kongossa* (gossip) circulates actively on social media and the streets. Given his advancing age—in February 2024, he was ninety-one years old, making him the world's oldest elected head of state—such *kongossa* routinely fixates on Biya's mortality and hypothetical illnesses. As one activist said to me, “The man is the farthest from a god—he is a frail old man, nearly toppling, incapable of speech ... passing gas in public. *Popol va bientôt bolè* [Biya will be finished soon]” (conversation with Christel, March 2019).⁵ For many Cameroonian political activists, Biya's routine absences illustrate his disdain and disregard for the struggles of everyday people.

Yet, given Biya's extensive array of public relations managers and lobbyists, his near-total absence from the public sphere is likely a deliberate aspect of his image management. Biya retains the London-based global law and lobbying firm Squire Patton Boggs in a \$55,000 USD monthly contract (Meyer 2019). The government employs two of the former aids of US Senator Ted Cruz, David Polyansky and Catherine Frazier, as well as the Brooklyn-based former Huffington Post managing editor and author of several nonfiction business books, Jimmy Soni. Polyansky is a Texas-based Chief Strategy Officer at the US public affairs firm AxAdvocacy, an agency self-described on their website as “help[ing] high-profile clients improve their overall brand position, rapidly and effectively respond[ing] to timely communications challenges and strategically navigat[ing] the always-evolving political landscape.” According to a contract filed with the US Justice Department, these entities work to “promote a positive and favourable image” of Biya's government (Meyer 2019, n.p.). Authoritarian image management strategies are wide-ranging and multiscalar. They include targeted and broad-spectrum pro-party branding (including misinformation stratagems), alongside risk suppression, like the dismissals and delegitimizations of activists that I discuss at length below. The goal of such programs is to regulate what political strategists call “the information environment.” Given the PR infrastructure of Biya's government and his multiple decades in power, his movement between protracted periods of concealment, his tightly controlled and vague public statements, and the party's demonization of dissenters are premeditated features of his governance practice.

Corporate and authoritarian actors are neither omniscient nor synchronized and some of their decision-making is likely sporadic. Yet their actions are patterned, with patterned effects situated within histories of structural and imperial plunder and exploitation. In my analysis, I purposefully avoid the term “regime” for its colonial hypocrisy (as a term almost universally applied to gover-

²I remained in contact with many of these activists via WhatsApp and social media, and some of these conversations are also represented here, with each activist's permission. My broader work and research have involved collaborating to host workshops on writing and comedy in authoritarian contexts in Yaoundé and Buea, Cameroon, between 2021 and 2023; the activists I worked with were sometimes involved in these other projects.

³The social media platform Twitter was renamed X in July 2023; this change occurred after my research was conducted. Thus, X remains referred to as Twitter in this publication, and posts are referred to as tweets.

⁴For example, through an amendment to the constitution, Cameroonian Law 96/06, an “Act of State” is issued directly from the president. This law gives total power to the executive: An Act issued from the President is “subject neither to parliamentary approval nor to judicial review” (Kamga 2019, 454).

⁵Some conversations with activists are pseudonymized, and some are not, at the behest of the activist in question. Some insisted they wanted their names to be published. To protect the people who gave up their time and energy to speak with me through this research, I have not distinguished between (un)altered names.

nance in the Global South), but also because it would ascribe a fixity to the Cameroonian state that belies extensive internal debates and battles within the Biya's "entourage" (as activists call the entrenched apparatus that has formed around him). Internal frictions came to the fore in January 2023, with the truly brutal torture and assassination of the journalist and radio host, Arsène Salomon Mbani ("Martinez") Zogo, by several of Biya's allies.⁶ Zogo publicly denounced one of Biya's allies for embezzlement and fraud prior to his disappearance, torture, and assassination. Zogo himself was a former political strategist of Biya, having worked on Biya's presidential campaign in 2018. He was a known "proche" of the First Lady.

Networked within global racial capitalism, authoritarian states like Cameroon carve niche positions of relative security and manage the shifting neoimperial strategies of multiple global empires, including the United States, France, Russia, and China. Equipped with this brief authoritarian and imperial political context, the next section looks at moments and spaces of dissent.

Slow Dissent in Cameroon—Sardines, Zombies, and Presidential Ghosts

The disappearance of activists and journalists and routine beatings in the street have been filmed, posted online, and circulated on social media within Cameroon (Kojoué 2022; Ndengue et al. 2023). Influenced by the rise of social media tools that reward attention-grabbing content across the continent (Dwyer & Molony 2019), as well as the national political context in which the state addresses political dissent through absolute forms of violence and suppression, activists often deliberately platformed their public protests within international spaces and territories, including Cameroonian embassies abroad, international hotels, and online forums (Ndengue et al. 2023). These transnational and Pan-African solidarities fostered prospects for peace and political solidarity beyond Eurocentric logic and authoritarian practices. In my reading of transnational solidarities, Cameroon is a site of political contestation and possibility, against which transnational practices and activists remain oriented, responsive, and accountable. Transnational solidarities are deeply integrated with local politics.

By virtue of creative necessity, activists built websites, formed discussion groups, pressured international media and human rights organizations to censure the government's acts, and organized protests at Cameroonian Embassies. This included the January 2019 occupation of the Paris Embassy by the Cameroonian activist group, the Brigade Anti-Sardinards (Anti-Sardine Brigade, or BAS), for example. Social media provided a venue for information-sharing and coalition-building within a place-based context of authoritarianism and state violence (Murray and Daley 2023; Ndengue et al. 2023). However, as activists strategically supplemented street protests with digital coordination, intentionally antagonistic and provocative posts, or public shaming, digital activism simultaneously expanded surveillance mechanisms and opened novel domains for targeting, policing, and harassment (Murray 2023).

The name of one prominent transnational group, Anti-Sardine Brigade (BAS), is a tongue-in-cheek metaphor for the ruling party. Political dissidents refer to members of

Cameroon's People's Democratic Movement (CPDM or *Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounais*) as "sardines." This is a popular quip to mean they are "brainless" (another popular metaphor is "zombie"), much like how sardines have their heads chopped off before they are placed inside tins. Sardines are small feeders, travelling in large schools, voluntarily imprisoning themselves inside tin cans, without windows and doors to the outside world (author fieldnotes, 2019). The metaphor also alludes to CPDM's established practice of buying votes with sardines and beer: CPDM members are lined up and allocated a tin of sardines, a can of beer, and a piece of bread after attending political rallies and meetings. (Some of the activists I spoke with jokingly talked about their own practices of slow dissent: learning CPDM chants and songs, so that they could accompany friends and neighbors to rallies just for the food.)

"CPDM members must adore sardines!" the joke goes, because they are like cats, willing to vote repeatedly for CPDM even at their peril and to their own detriment, "just to lick the oil" (conversations with activists, March 2019–May 2019). Mélo explained that the way to catch a cat is to place an empty sardine tin with some residual oil in it where you want to trap them, and wait. Even against their best judgment and looming sense of danger, the cats will come for the oil—their "drug" (conversation with activist, March 2019). The reference to "sardine oil" has been edited over time, so that just the pithy mention of "oil" becomes enough to critique power. Expressions like "the oil is good!" or merely "l'oil là—hein!" (that oil, right?) can be used in particular contexts to call out and critique the state's ideological indoctrination and cultivation of a culture of deference. The abbreviation from sardine tin to mere leftover oil speaks to the vacant political promises and changing expectations of shared progress over the years. In present-day Cameroon, "just a taste" of the oil of the sardine is sufficient to satisfy the lower rungs of CPDM cardholders, according to critics.⁷

For the students, artists, and activists I spoke with, Biya supporters are like sardines and zombies,⁸ unthinkingly following the cruel needs of their stomachs. Another popular refrain—there are so many clever dismissals of the powerful in Cameroon, it is not unusual to overhear and encounter dozens per day in Yaoundé—is, *ils ont mangé leur cerveau* ("they ate their brains"). Who they are does not need to be specified openly; "they" are understood to be a Biya entourage. This is often said during a debate when someone seems to have been inculcated with the state's misinformation and deceptions: "my friend, they have eaten your brain." The comment signals that a generative conversation cannot continue. The person has identified a lack of self-awareness and reflexivity in the party member, who suffers in conditions of active exploitation and impoverishment, despite their apparent association with the party that has

⁷Supporters of the president attempted a counter-campaign to malign dissenters as "ethnically motivated" Bamilékés, calling themselves the "Anti-Tontine Brigade," in an attempt to disparage the horizontal Bamiléké economic collectives in which members pool funds and draw individually each month—intergenerational and self-governing collectives that are most often led by women. Activists I spoke with laughed about the counter-campaign, saying that they embraced the label "tontine" or that those who did should be proud rather than ashamed.

⁸The rap artist and political activist Général Valsero produced a political track titled "Zombie" that critiques those who continue to vote for the ruling party (including his family members). Valsero was arrested on January 26, 2019 for participating in the "White March"; he was charged with sedition and disturbing the peace and was in Kodingi prison until his release. Now based in France, he produces daily video political commentary via his "Général Valsero" social media accounts.

⁶The extent of the torture Zogo endured over many hours is nearly unimaginable. The atrocities are documented by Reporters Without Borders: <https://rsf.org/en/new-exclusive-and-key-testimonies-obtained-rsf-killing-cameroonian-radio-journalist-martinez-zogo>.

governed the country for more than forty years. But, having tasted the “oil,” they are dizzy and drugged with the (always unfulfilled) promises of satiety and power.

On June 29, 2019, the Anti-Sardine Brigade went to the InterContinental Hotels Group in Geneva, where Biya and his closest entourage frequently reside during his extended European vacations. Approximately 250 Cameroonians from various European countries came together to occupy the streets in front of the hotel. In the live-streaming video of a protest (since removed by YouTube), activists shouted, “Paul Biya—assassin! Paul Biya—assassin!” At one point, the founder of BAS, Calibri Calibro, cried, “Geneva has become a battlefield ... we won this battle ... the Anti-Sardine Brigade has won this battle!” Activists reproached those Swiss hotel employees and people passing-by of protecting and housing a dictator. The Swiss police responded with force, deploying tear gas and lacrymogene gas. Some Ivorian protestors were present in solidarity. I was told, “this is what the streets of Cameroon would look like if we were not killed for simply speaking against Polpol [i.e., Paul Biya]” (conversations with activists, October 2019). On social media, one user tweeted at the President’s Twitter account, “I made the trip [to Switzerland] to track you. Now, thanks to us, you no longer have the right to leave your rat hole. Do not even try to come to France” (my translation).

Another moment of dissent revealed the multidimensional ways in which local political struggles are picked up within horizontal transnational networks. Clement Ytembé Bonda, a young worker at the French multinational Plantations of Upper Penja (PHP), posted a video on social media denouncing the government’s alleged embezzlement of 335 million USD of COVID-19 funds from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁹ In the video, he exposes the discrepancies between his life and the state’s pillaging with impunity, struggling to work seven days a week at PHP, leaving his bed as early as 6 a.m., with little to eat.

After the video went viral in June 2021, Bonda and two fellow PHP employees, Boris André Wameni and Wouvé Flavy Kamous, who allegedly helped to film and post the video, were arrested. They were beaten by security forces, sentenced to twelve months in prison, and ordered to pay a fine of 500,000 CFA. After the arrests, BAS organized an occupation of the Cameroonian Embassy in Brussels, Belgium, June 14, 2021. They demanded the release of the three activists. Protestors were able to gain entry to the Embassy by pretending to be present to file official documentation. They livestreamed the occupation, chanting “libérez-le” (release him). Activists identified PHP, based in Marseille, as notoriously unethical in suppressing worker movements and exploiting labor (*Transparency International* 2015). Soon after the occupation of the Embassy in Belgium, an activist in Lille, France, protested the arrest by destroying dozens of bananas at a supermarket, denouncing the role of France as an importer of Cameroonian fruit. Smashing and tossing the bananas on the floor, the activist cried, “while France supports the illegitimate regime of Biya in Cameroon ... all of the bananas you eat from my country will be spilt by me ... You do not have the right to eat bananas in France while my brother is arrested in Cameroon.”¹⁰

In another episode of multispatial pressure upon the state, activists spearheaded an international petition against perceived French involvement in domestic politics. In April

2020, activists noted that Biya had been missing from the public sphere since the beginning of March 2020. A video capturing a meeting between President Biya and the French Ambassador to Cameroon, Christophe Guillhou, subsequently went viral on social media. Dissenters and sceptics identified seeming chronological errors in the video and quickly alleged it was a fake. At one moment, Biya’s face seems to flicker in and out as if it was transposed, with the curtain behind him visible over his profile. Citizen journalists noted other irregular practices. For example, the French Ambassador arrived alone. Each of these seeming irregularities led to claims that the video was a deepfake (e.g., a modified video that transposes the image of one person onto another), but a deepfake that was only credible and realizable with continuing French defense of and assistance for the Biya government.

Launched on April 18, 2020, a petition called for the immediate departure of Guillhou. People speculated on social media that Guillhou had organized the false hearing with President Biya. The petition read,

Guillhou should depart to reassure the Cameroonian people as to France’s desire to finally scrupulously respect the right of the Cameroonian people to democratic sovereignty, which France has flouted...which has not yet really been followed by structural decolonization (monetary, military, geopolitical) in [the] sixty years after the nominal independence of 1 January 1960.¹¹

The petition exceeded 23,000 signatories. In April 2020, opposition leader Maurice Kamto requested that the National Assembly “establish the vacancy of the presidential office” because the president was absent with whereabouts unknown. The state did not respond directly to the petition, nor did the French Embassy.

Activists had diverse accounts of the power inequalities embedded within transnational solidarities. There were frequently tensions and ambiguities between the transnationalization of struggle and the desire for vaster political expression and representation in the country. While some activists were eager and welcoming of diaspora solidarities, others cautioned that these voices would overpower local activists and guide movements in different (possibly more elite) directions. Particularly, activists organizing online decry that most of their views and “likes” came from outside Cameroon, despite young people within the country being their primary target audience (conversation with activist, May 2019).

These moments illustrate some of the nonlinear and slow practices—from jokes and metaphors to occupations, marches, and petitions—that activists used to upset and refuse imperial relations, political marginality, and authoritarian politics. Some transnational horizontal solidarities worked beyond formal channels to imagine and realize new political worlds. Yet, as the next section of this article explores, these very practices were twisted into a means to discredit dissent as “foreign” in an ultranationalist ideology of “Cameroonian-ness.”

Kamer-amère/Bitter Cameroon: The Sabotage of Critics as “Foreign”

When dozens of the activists arrested for the January 26, 2019 “White March,” organized by the Movement for the

⁹Clement Ytembé Bonda’s monologue is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtfxHwbyDeI&t=1s> (accessed May 11, 2022).

¹⁰Video of the supermarket protest is available here: <https://nep.facebook.com/MimiMefoInfo/videos/602967021095361/> (accessed December 1, 2022).

¹¹https://blogs.mediapart.fr/franklin-nyamsi/blog/230420/lambassadeur-de-france-au-cameroun-denonce-par-une-petition-populaire?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Sharing&xtor=CS3-67



Figure 1. Screenshot circulated on social media apparently captured a moment in which President Biya's face flickers in and out of the screen, taken by digital activists to mean the video is a deepfake. Source: anonymous.

Renaissance of Cameroon, were being transported in armored police trucks from their holding cells across the streets of the city to Kodengui Central Prison in Yaoundé, a thirty-seven-year-old activist and mason, Dojo, was eating lunch on a roadside. He shared an encounter that he had that day with a woman who was selling beignets in a stall nearby.

As one of the 4×4 trucks containing prisoners in the canvased truck bed passed, the woman scoffed aloud at the “troublemaking” protestors and remarked, “Good for them—now they will learn how to shut their mouths.” Dojo knew some of the activists who had been rounded up by security forces, some of whom were likely being transferred for booking into the maximum-security prison. Kodengui is renowned for physical abuse and poor living conditions (Amnesty International 2020). He said that, on that day, her outburst was “too much” (“c’était trop”). He broke his general taboo against speaking about politics in public, endan-

gering himself in the tense political context. He told me that he cried out at the misplaced injustice of her dismissal. He recalled saying to her:

Those young people—those children—are struggling for *you*! You are here selling your beignets on the street, in the dust and the mud, every day, struggling. *You* suffer! What do you think they are marching for? They are trying to make life better for you! (conversation with Dojo, my translation, May 2019)

Dojo described feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and anxiously powerless in the face of the open spite of her comments. He remembered that the woman was overwhelmed (dépasser) by his remarks—she did not understand. “How can we make them see? How can we touch them, impact them, in the oil they drink?” he asked me (conversation with Dojo).

Each activist I spoke with had similar stories of accusation, fatigue, and isolation. Activists in Yaoundé spoke candidly of the dangers they faced, including due to the state's infiltration of movements. One activist told me, "We have a well-equipped team, and we insist on keeping the peace and avoiding the destruction of property" because the state will "target us as terrorists ... just for talking, we are already terrorists in 'kamer-amère' [bitter Cameroon], as we say, in this 'continent'" (conversation with activist, March 2023). (A popular catchphrase was that Cameroonian systems and rubrics were so unique, unrecognizable, and inconsistent against other national scripts and experiences, that the country could not be understood as a country as such, but rather as its own self-contained and self-referencing "continent."¹²)

This interaction was not incidental. Stories of activists, young people, and the diaspora being blamed as the sources of strife or disorder in the country were common. Activists identified this narrative as a limitation hindering political change and coalition-building. While at a COVID testing center in Yaoundé in 2020, for example, I witnessed a young francophone man set to travel to Geneva complain that the process to register for a test was taking more than 3 hours to complete (results were not received for 24–48 hours after registration). In response, a man responsible for typing up the contact details for people queuing turned to him and said, "You come back here with your problems ... Cameroon is good, hein. Cameroon is better without you." The young man commented to his neighbor, "Have they eaten their brains, or what? Who do they think pays the salaries in this country—it is us, les mbengists who create their jobs, who work en mbeng and send them money to live" (author fieldnotes, July 2020). Banal dismissals of the diaspora as causing problems and as being unwanted were routine in Yaoundé.

The state tended to perceive members of the diaspora as hyper-threats to national security. This was evident through activist testimonies as well as successive state-led delegitimizing portrayals of activists as "terrorists," "foreigners," or funded by international agents (see also [Orock 2019](#)). A routine authoritarian PR tactic is the dismissal of critique as externally driven and imperially supported actions that threaten state sanctity, authority, and peace. For the CPDM, dissenters are "pseudo-Cameroonians" who seek to, as one pro-CPDM political analyst, Mathias Eric Oyona Nguini, claimed:

destabilise and overthrow the Cameroonian government. [Pseudo-Cameroonians are] one of the instruments leveraged by intrusive neo-imperial powers to create hybrid wars aimed at consolidating the neo-colonial satellization. (cited in [Endong 2020](#), 123)

Of course, similar state antagonisms of diasporas have been noted elsewhere across the continent (in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, for example). But in Cameroon, the state's movements to affect a political demobilization of the diaspora have taken on an absolute edge, including policies likely designed intentionally to make returning to Cameroon logistically and financially difficult, if not impossible. There is no mechanism for members of the diaspora to vote abroad. Cameroon does not allow dual citizenship, and there is no special (heritage or diaspora) status for Cameroonians who

become naturalized citizens of other countries. A Cameroonian of the diaspora who becomes a naturalized citizen of another country must apply for the same family, visitor, or business visa as any other foreign national. There are no visas-on-arrival and more and more paperwork (and money) are demanded for visa applications every year for the last fifteen years. The "racialization of citizenship" ([Hawthorne 2022](#)) means that they face dual expulsions: renunciations of citizenship in Cameroon and frequent exclusion as Black African migrants abroad.

There are many challenges for those who resist the political manipulations fostered by divide-and-rule postcolonial politics—some of the difficulties are emotional and personal. It is exhausting for critics and activists to perpetually be held to address false narratives of their "foreign-ness," or arguments that they are "imperial proxies," or claims that they have been "brainwashed by the West." For some representatives of the state, calls for economic and gender justice and liberation are tantamount to "Eurocentrism." The state has intentionally fostered these divisions and frictions among social groups and constituencies to fracture conceivable coalition-building ([Nyammjoh 2005, 2010](#)). The ethnicization of "Cameroonian-ness" as a narrowly defined set of characteristics—paramount among them the disinclination to criticize the state and loyalty to the CPDM—works to channel national debate into discussions that restrict or avoid acknowledgement of state violence and state complicity with actually existing imperialism. Members of the Biya government openly postulate that it is impossible for any "true patriotic Cameroonian" to sympathize with any grievances from separatists (legitimate or otherwise). Thus, an element of authentically "Cameroonian-ness" is ascribed predominantly to CPDM members and sympathizers as well as those from the Beti and Yezoum tribes who do not publicly voice criticism of the state. These repressive campaigns were first waged by the French colonial authorities, who actively cultivated a political system based on the creation and maintenance of group divisions as a method of population control and labor suppression. Divide-and-rule has since "become the very essence of the political system in Cameroon" ([Kamga 2019, 446](#)). Disillusion and fear have transformed the politics of belonging and the relationships between different groups ([Page et al. 2010](#)).

After state media and spokespersons manufacture division, they further marginalize political opponents by charging them for creating "ethnic divisions" ([Page et al. 2010](#)). This has been evidenced by the state's monotonous dismissals of Maurice Kamto as a Bamileke ethnocentrist, despite having no evidence. Kamto and supporters of the Movement for Cameroonian Renaissance are thus constantly relegated to the position of needing to prove that their political ambitions are Pan-Cameroonian. As Mélo explained, CPDM members and representatives conflate a criticism of ethno-nationalism with evidence of tribalism by the critic (conversations with Mélo, 3/2020). One activist, for example, who was born and raised in Yaoundé, described being called a "dirty Bamileke" in school and spoke of what they perceived to be an intensification of overt forms of anti-Bamileke discrimination in the last five years (conversations with Charlotte, March 2020).

Mélo further indicated that a pro-CPDM populist distrust, contempt, and resentment for les mbengists provide the ideological foundation for the state to periodically circulate false narratives that certain activists abroad deliver or fund shipments of arms to various political groups within Cameroon. For example, Maurice Kamto and the US-based Cameroonian writer and political activist Patrice Nganang

¹²Cameroonians call the country "the continent" to reference the country's outsized global contribution to sport and intellectual domains, as the country regularly produces top scholars (from mathematics to the humanities) and top performers (from Mixed Martial Arts to football).

have both been accused of arms trafficking, with no evidence¹³. All the while, as activists note, those same government officials have foreign passports.¹⁴ This displacement of blame fuels intra-Cameroonian strife and alienates people from one another, even as they share a common struggle (as Dojo's testimony above so powerfully demonstrated). This state narrative fosters an environment in which it becomes difficult to acknowledge and confront Cameroonian origins for Cameroonian problems (author footnotes, March 2020).

The stigmatization of virtually all critics of the state as ethnic-nationalists, "subversives," and "terrorists" who seek to destabilize the country is rendered legible due to the state's entrenched encouragement of ethno-racialized marginalization and displacement of blame for state weakness and failures upon foreign actors, including the Cameroonian diaspora.

Calls for Foreign Attention and Intervention

Within a political milieu wherein dominant state actors dismiss activists as "foreign," appeals for international attention may have a demobilizing impact on resistance movements or may be a distraction to fostering cross- and pan-Cameroonian solidarities. For political and social justice activists, tensions and ambiguities frequently existed between critiquing tangible state violence and demands for foreign assistance, attention, and intervention. When people called for international attention to state violence and brutality beyond and outside the epistemological superstructure of Eurocentrism, they did so based on shared respect, shared experiences of marginality, and common humanity.

Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo's (2011, 419) explain that there is a "need to recognise the riskiness of responsibility and the enigmatic responses that appeals to be responsible may invite," while Sabaratnam (2017) argues that accounts of interventionism require political analyses of their rationals (see also Fagioli and Malito 2024). Calls for international attention and mediation are frequently grounded upon notions of colonial responsibility that appeal to, center, and reinforce the agencies of former colonial states (Raghuram et al. 2011). Appeals for political action and attention that draw upon the language of "assistance," "help," and "aid," echo imperial signifiers (e.g., *la mission civilisatrice*), which justified colonial expansion under the guise of ethical and religious betterment (Raghuram et al. 2011). As such, there is a need to politicize calls for intervention and to denaturalize "the international community" as a uniform and neutral community—the term frequently acts as an avatar for neoimperial states and operates in their interests. In my analysis, I distinguish between international intervention (in all its broad forms) and transnational solidarities, the latter of which is grounded in and guided by the political aspirations and realities of Cameroonian social justice activists.

Calls to intervention from activists working in postcolonial societies can be engaged *knowingly*—this means in a spirit of anti-imperialism, alongside an awareness of the perils of imperial appropriations, the economic dimensions

that frequently motivate interventionism, and criticism of French political domination. I spoke with and engaged with political activists on social media who articulated demands for international action against the Biya government. Many scholar-activist and legal advocate collectives have pushed for diplomatic engagement with Cameroon to resolve the protracted conflict in the Anglophone region. These included calls for international or diplomatic interventions critical of Biya, targeted economic sanctions, and appeals for statements and forms of transnational solidarity to put pressure on the Biya entourage to affect progressive political change. These calls were particularly evident in conversations with digital activists, including digital activists in the diaspora and activists organizing online from within Cameroon, many of whom seek to connect with members of the diaspora abroad. Notably, activists were careful to refuse and reject suggestions for external military intervention. While some activists indicated that the overthrow of Biya in a process of neocolonial intervention would be ineffective in the realization of emancipatory politics and peace, others felt that sacrifices of sovereignty could be made temporarily for the good of the people (author fieldnotes, 2019, 2020, 2023).

Between 2016 and 2020, I followed various calls for international media attention, international sanctions, internationally driven dialogue, or political and diplomatic criticism of Biya's government. Calls for international attention broadly follow these main patterns:

- (1) generic appeals for media and political attention, ungrounded in specific demands
- (2) calls for "impartial" investigations of alleged abuses
- (3) demands for dialogue between parties, often with country mediators named
- (4) calls for political action, including censorship of state officials, withdrawal of funds, or targeted sanctions

In the context of the Ambazonian conflict in Southern Cameroon, calls for intervention took many forms. Distinctive collectives appealed to various international political leaders to intervene and speak about the political situation in Cameroon across various scales. In their research with Anglophone refugees and people impacted by the ongoing Ambazonian conflict, for example, Angove and Willis (2020, n.p.) highlight that:

Interviewees repeatedly called on the international community to intervene and end the violence...Calls for international intervention indicate a perception that this is far from an internal dispute... Appeals for international action therefore draw attention to the pre-existing involvement of a range of international actors who have a corresponding duty to respond.

This ongoing pressure has led to public statements from the European Union, for example, High Representative Federica Mogherini's (2018) pronouncement that violence in the country's North West and South West regions was "unacceptable." On May 30, 2018, the United Nations declared a humanitarian crisis in Southern Cameroon and called for impartial investigations. The European Parliament condemned the human rights violations and called for investigations of potential war crimes in 2019. While activists appreciate these statements, some also refer to them as inadequate forms of "lip service" ("paroles superficielles") or, more damningly, as neoimperial "hypocrisy" (author fieldnotes, November–December 2019, March 2023). In a conversation with one self-described militant about the perils and advantages of appeals to internationalism, an activist re-

¹³On his activism, Patrice told me, "I think it is foolish ... in general, to try to understand what the state is thinking because I spend my time finding strategies for people who are not in the state and it takes my time already ... In general, I do not think about what the state thinks because they are ugly anyway" (interview with Patrice, September 09/2018).

¹⁴Biya is a dual citizen of Cameroon and Switzerland. Dual citizenship is illegal in Cameroon.

turned my question to me: “When our government is killing and beating us, who do you think we ask for help and solidarity? We want everyone to know what is happening in our country to our people ... [but] it is like we are punished if we do [appeal for international action] and condemned if we do not” (interview with Charlotte, December 2019).

From September 30 to October 4, 2019, following sustained pressure, the government held a highly publicized national dialogue. Pro-Biya political activists celebrated and championed Biya as a generous and proactive leader in op-eds and televised debates. The event was spearheaded by Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute; strategically, appointed with a nod to the politics of representation, as Ngute comes from the English-speaking southwestern region. Biya’s appearance at the event fueled discussion of his possible cognitive and physical frailty. For activists organizing in opposition to the Biya government, the dialogue was little more than “political theater” (activist Eric Tataw, qtd. in [Kindzeka 2019](#), n.p.) and international virtue signaling (author field-notes, 2019).

Indeed, critical scholars assert that, including in the case of the Cameroonian National Dialogue, “most dialogues are not very successful or consequential as regards their results and impact [however, what they do is to] absorb the attention of foreign diplomats who pin their hopes on dialogue as offering a solution to crisis” ([Mehler et al. 2020](#)). So, while the outcomes of such interventions may be relatively superficial for local communities, they constitute an essential soft power foreign policy tool in neoimperial contexts (see [figure 1](#)).

Indeed, the Cameroonian state has routinely made strategic policy concessions under international pressures and governance hegemonies (Albaugh 2011), including the inclusion of women in the political sphere ([Adams 2007](#)). Melinda Adams (2007, 192) explains that forms of foreign pressure are frequently covert: rather than “in the form of coercive threats ... [such pressures take] the form of international norms.” Several of the state’s strategic policy modifications have provided “low-cost international legitimacy” ([Adams 2007](#), 176) in that they have been superficial and have served to coopt and redirect political energy for change rather than effecting structural or significant empowerment. Thus, international pressure can be channeled by the state in ways that further establish its power and reach, for example, by extending its patronage systems through the provision of remunerations, including through goods, skills training, equipment, and more ([Adams 2007](#)). Such strategic policy changes (adopted following international pressures) have an extended history in Cameroon. The state has largely permitted forms of soft interventionism, for example, via development and economic policies.

Appeals for further intervention emerged following the National Dialogue. Open statements from academic, activist, and legal organizations sought political action and censorship, particularly from the French, Swiss, and United States. For example, the University of Pretoria’s Centre for Human Rights released an open letter to the French President Emmanuel Macron:

We respectfully urge France to use its considerable influence with the government of President Paul Biya to encourage Cameroon to openly embrace the Swiss-led peace talks as a means of ending the killings and atrocities being committed in the North West and South West regions of the country... The Swiss-led talks now appear to be the only path to an appropriate political

solution through an inclusive negotiating table (University of Pretoria November 12, 2019, 1–2)

In an instance of applied international pressure, Cameroon was suspended from its preferred trade status under the US-led African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) on January 1, 2020. The suspension was in response to “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights,” including “extrajudicial killings, arbitrary and unlawful detention, and torture” ([Kindzeka 2019](#), n.p.). Again, within Cameroon, the move was described as “mostly symbolic.” Rene Emmanuel Sadi, the Minister of Territorial Administration (2011 to current), dismissed accusations that the military had committed human rights violations with declarations of territorial sovereignty, saying the government was “restoring order and protecting Cameroon’s territorial integrity” ([Kindzeka 2019](#)).

Activists and artists critiqued ongoing state violence against protestors as nestled within neoimperial relations. At the same time, people sometimes appealed for foreign attention and condemnation of state aggression, often from institutions and states situated in neoimperial milieus. Appeals for and against foreign intervention—apparent via activist campaigns, social media posts, open letters, political commentaries, and disinformation campaigns, as I have discussed—revealed tense contestations between the ruling party and dissenters. They simultaneously illuminated the snares and ruses of nationalist authoritarian governance practices within neocolonial global capitalism.

Staging Anti-Imperial Protests

On October 3, 2019, Paul Biya issued a decree that discontinued the court proceedings against several hundred political activists. The decision included the release of Maurice Kamto, who had been jailed for nine months, along with hundreds of political activists who participated in demonstrations in January 2019 (see [figures 2 and 3](#)). On October 5, 2019, in a highly publicized move, Biya released Kamto alongside 104 of the activists who had been roundup in association with the January Protest organ’d by the MRC¹⁵ and 333 activists associated with the Anglophone protests. Biya signed the decree on the penultimate day of the National Dialogue Conference on the Anglophone Crisis.

The online commentary among the public and activists regarding Biya’s Twitter post announcing the decision to release the prisoners was heterogeneous. Alongside posts of praise and gratitude, Cameroonians showed considerable derision, calling out the “hypocrisy” of not releasing the university academic and Anglophone secessionist leader Ayuk Sisiku Tabe, who was the interim president of the (unrecognized) Federal Republic of Ambazonia. One Twitter user commented, “It is sad to have experienced [Biya’s] ... betrayal of African people to foreigners.” Another supposed, “Did [Biya] have a choice? Really, the shame” (Twitter commentary, my translation). Several on Facebook commented that the release of political prisoners was an obvious maneuver—as one noted, “a childish political stunt”—designed to pacify the international community: “He manipulates the opinion of the international community for releasing 333 [prisoners]. What about those you killed? Are you going to release them too?” Another noted, “Your political manipulations are so predictable after 37 years of rule” (Facebook commentaries, my translation). One person wrote:

¹⁵Among the activists released were the musician Valsero and Christian Penda Ekoka, Paul Eric Kingue, Albert Nzongang, Michelle Ndoki, and Mamadou Mota.

#Cameroon Freedom songs, 'Freedom! Freedom! We are Free !', being chanted by MRC supporters as they await the 104 detainees, including the leader Maurice Kamto, out of jail.

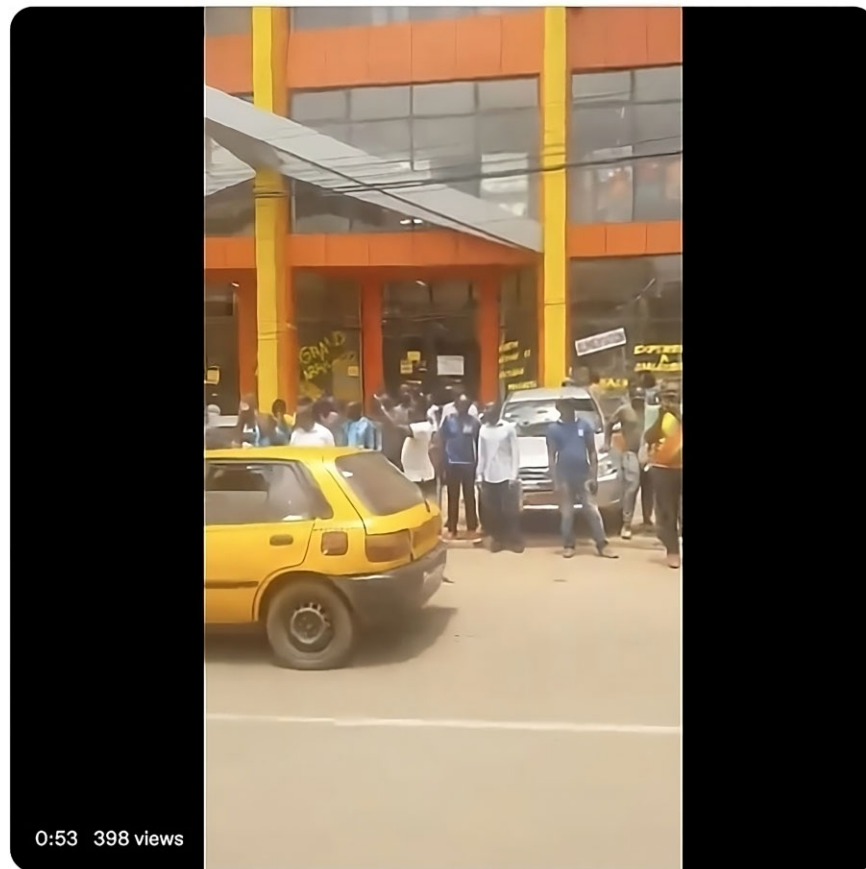


Figure 4. Video of supporters of Maurice Kamto gather to celebrate his release circulated on social media. Source: anonymous.

nents. I told Biya we must not meet in Lyon if Kamto is not released. He (Kamto) was freed because we put pressure [on him]. And now, the situation is deteriorating again. I will call President Biya next week. We shall mount maximum pressure on him for him to put an end to the situation. I am fully aware and concerned about incidents of violence in Cameroon. These incidents of violence are unacceptable. I am doing my best. (cited in Pibasso 2020)

Macron's words sparked controversy within Cameroon, simultaneously reaffirming what many activists critical of the status quo had long known: that neoimperialism persisted in the government. The state reacted with indignation, reaffirming Cameroonian sovereignty while evading a deeper conversation about imperialism and interventionism in the country. The Secretary General of the President, Ferdinand Ngoh Ngoh, quickly opposed Macron's statements, claiming that Biya "is accountable for his actions to the sole sovereign Cameroonian people and not to a foreign leader, even from a friendly country" (my translation). A press release issued by Cameroon's Minister of Communication, Rene Emmanuel Sadi, reiterated that France is "A country

with whom Cameroon shares strong historical ties and relations of friendship and cooperation. These relations are mutually beneficial and have always been founded on the sacred principles of State sovereignty and mutual respect." Significantly, President Biya made no statement himself.

In response to the political controversy surrounding Macron's statements, more than 100 pro-Biya people gathered to protest outside the French Embassy in Cameroon's capital city, Yaoundé (see figure 4). Others organized outside the French consulate in Douala. The small-scale demonstrations publicized Cameroonian youth's prevalent anti-French and anti-colonial sentiments—but also how the state actors strategically sought to position themselves as "anti-imperialists." In a conversation about the episode with a Yaoundé-based political activist, I learned that CPDM supporters were likely paid—or promised payments—for their action (conversation with activist, 02/2022). According to the activist, a staged participant might be paid 5,000–10,000 CAF for an appearance. In one instance, he explained that he was invited via a neighborhood WhatsApp group to participate in a staged "welcome rally" for the return of a CPDM party member at the Yaoundé Bolé International Airport for 10,000 CFA. These small state-sanctioned actions were

broadcasted and promoted in domestic and international media.

Indeed, Macron's statements decrying the Cameroonian state's atrocities were potentially damaging for peace and justice activists on the ground, as they provided further ammunition to the state's claim that collective projects to criticize Biya have "external origins." One Twitter user posted a response to a tweet from the account of Paul Biya (@PR_Paul_BIYA), "please, put pressure on foreign governments [flags of US, Belgium, South Africa and UK] harboring armchair generals who hide in their countries and incite violence in [Cameroonian flag]." The Biya government's instrumentalist narrative of "anti-imperialism" distracts from popular movements for expanded rights, livelihoods, and political change.

Similarly, during a televised press conference in Yaoundé on March 9, 2020, Cameroon's Minister of Territorial Administration, Paul Atanga Nji, critiqued nonprofit organizations and human rights associations in Cameroon for their "recurrent manipulation" in reporting on abuses in the southwest and northwest regions of the country. Atanga Nji declared:

Many NGOs have revealed themselves as enemies of our country, regularly propagating information that is completely false on the management of crises by our government in the regions as mentioned earlier... they have become laboratories of fake reports with the sole objective of tarnishing the image of the country's defense and security forces. (press briefing, Atanga Nji March 9, 2020, qtd. in [Mefo 2020](#), n.p.)

Calling NGOs "remotely controlled," he warned that such organizations "must read just before it becomes too late" ([Mefo 2020](#) 2020). Again, the indictments of instability as externally driven fit within a broader tapestry of blame dispersal and deflection practiced by state representatives.

The state's strategic statements against foreign intervention stand in opposition to their ongoing sanctioning of corporate and economic neoimperialism, which is foundational to maintaining and operating state power. State-initiated anti-interventionist propaganda provides a diversion from more insidious, material, and existent forms of interventionism, including economic interventionism and the role of corporate extractivism in the Cameroonian political economy ([Murrey 2015, 2016](#)). Activists reminded me that Cameroon continued to function as a neoimperial extractivist economy. That, as such, it was actively semi-destabilized by necessity. In these contexts, "liberal peace [is] a form of imperial global order" ([Sabaratnam 2013](#), p. 260). Calls for and against international intervention based on liberal norms can serve to sanction and maintain global capitalism.

Worldmaking beyond Interventionism and Imperialism

For political activists, Pan-Africanism is often necessarily articulated through a multiscale criticism of both the post-colonial state and neoimperial and corporate powers. A common refrain from the young activists I spoke with was that greater international attention to the political situation in Cameroon was welcome but not prioritized. Moreover, they insisted that it must be contextualized within the history of empire and *la francafrique*, or France's persistent political-economic domination and cultural hegemony within postcolonial states. Mélo asked, "When have French leaders ever expressed generosity in African politics? For us, it is too much" (June 2018).

For Mélo, a PhD student studying and practicing theater at the University of Yaoundé, censorship and misinformation in the domestic media was a topic of considerable urgency. She explained that most radio and television stations in contemporary Cameroon are little more than "the tam-tams of the President," beating the drum of ethnic mistrust and pro-party ideology (conversations with Mélo, March 2020). For the digitally connected youth, whom she called "génération androïde," social media activism offers essential platforms to connect and share information beyond the state's televised "réseaux de haine" or networks of hatred (conversation with Mélo, March 2020; [Nyamnjoh 2010](#), 64–5). She traveled the country during the 2018 presidential elections, working for the candidacy of opposition leader Maurice Kamto. For Mélo, attacking what she called the "political passivity" and "fatalism" of people in Yaoundé was of greater importance than appeals to international attention. Mélo organized and spoke on a variety of political issues, including those that do not attract sizeable international notice, like intensifying maternal and infant mortality, the rise of unnecessarily imposed cesarian sections for delivering women in Cameroon, and the lack of political will to address poor road conditions, lack of space for pedestrians, and excessive numbers of automobile deaths due to "negligence or bad organization" (conversations with Mélo, March 2020). She took me to a neighboring street, where a young child had been killed by a motorcycle taxi driver several days before one of our meetings.

In 2019, Flaubert was a twenty-six-year-old philosophy university student and political comedian living in Yaoundé. He critiqued the economic dominance and political strong-arming of *la francafrique*, which imparted mistrust and animosity toward French political elites. His criticism of French neoimperialism was rivalled only by his derision for Cameroonian political elites. He called the synergies between France and Cameroon a "mafia system" and jokingly referred to Cameroon as the country of "wandafukistan." He explained that he coined the term to name Cameroon as "a dysfunctional and corrupt country that every day makes me 'wanda' [i.e., surprised to the point of disbelief or wonderment]" (conversations with Flaubert, December 2019–January 2020). The Camfranglais term "wanda" means to feel shock, surprise, or disbelief, often to the point of being distressed or impressed (depending on the circumstances). He spoke of the burdens of participating in street protests and witnessing friends being beaten and arrested by military and police, saying, "Since the [contested] presidential elections in October 2018, we have been coming together ... we feel real joy during some moments. You know, people smile, dance, and come together. But the numbers of arrested and beaten are excessive ... I have so many friends who worry for me. They always send me SMSs to ask if I am alive if I have not posted on social media" (conversation with Flaubert).

He spoke animatedly about the anticipatory euphoria and palpable collective satisfaction, seeking to maintain optimism despite the sadness and anxiety of having hundreds of his friends in Kodengui Prison in 2019. "We know how they [the state] talk about us, we have to keep out infiltrators and always, always keep the peace. They [the movement leadership] tell[s] us always to avoid the destruction of property because they will beat us, arrest us, call us traitors" (conversation with Flaubert). His words revealed an acute awareness of how governmental officials publicly dismiss and castigate youth protestors. For Flaubert, international attention and awareness would be beneficial but would not determine the success or failure of the progressive political movement. He explained, "I speak only Camfranglais but I do not yet ar-

rive to touch them [“everyday” Cameroonians]. I want to be seen by the grand majority. I do not hide behind a fake profile like others. But I do not want to be a politician. I want to use my humour—each human has that something that the other does not. I have my humour.”

When I spoke to Flaubert in March 2023, he had taken up a post as a radio talk show host after nearly six months in hiding for his activism. His target audience was “undoubtedly normal Cameroonians on the street” (conversations with Flaubert)—even as his digital activism connects him more with Cameroonians of the diaspora in London, Paris, and Washington, DC (conversation with Flaubert;). He received funds via his Facebook and YouTube pages to buy a smart phone and other equipment for his political broadcasting (he “never” fundraises, but people contact him of their own volition when they are particularly touched by his commentary; he received 80,000 CFA, for example, from a woman who liked his post on International Women’s Day). Much like Mélo, his political orientation is expansive that includes criticisms of Christianity as a colonial mechanism (what he called “the Jesus business”) that frustrates political change by pacifying and distracting people (his most watched video was titled “Bob Marley is Jesus”; conversations with Flaubert). The tapestry of political imagination and worldmaking for activists in the country was multifaceted, heterogeneous, and emergent.

One frustration with transnational solidarities that activists spoke about was the need to simplify intricate local politics to ensure quick palatability. Foreign international networks and groups regularly mobil’d around a singular topic or issue; we have seen this in the considerations above focusing on those abroad working for Ambazonian independence, those organizing for peace in the Southwest and Northwest regions, and those mobilizing for the ousting of Biya. A totalizing prioritization of one objective can sideline other meaningful and decisive matters—it can also splinter nascent Pan-Cameroonian movements and frustrate coalition building. Activists were often acutely aware that global medias have patterns of streamlining, racializing, and generalizing their analyses of conflict in African societies (for example, manufacturing North/South and Christian/Muslim divisions as go-to explanations for multifaceted conflict). In seeking international support, internationally facing activists may inadvertently fall into dualisms for palatability. Tracing the effects of the internationalization of various protest individuals and groups in Cameroon, Pommerolle (2010, 263) explains that the uneven relations between international groups have frequently “reproduce[d] existing inequalities, with the effect that northern models of protest (in terms of both themes and tools) ultimately win out.” There were frictions, contradictions, and fissures between activists based in mbeng and Yaoundé that I have refused to center in this consideration.

For Cameroonian activists in Yaoundé, delinking from the international sphere was not the resolution. Political life and dissent were creative, multilocal, relational, and fluid. In the context of la francAfrique, the political system remained mired within geopolitical and domestic dynamics. For some activists, hope was in the potential for transnational solidarities that were radical, militant, and risk-taking. Others took it for granted that novel forms of solidarity would move beyond outdated versions of superficial and imperial appeals to foreign politicians and established institutions and organizations (see also Raghuram et al. 2011). Decolonized transnational solidarities begin with the awareness of how their potential remains marked by colonial legacies (Land 2015). These are the radical world-

making solidarities founded through shared struggle against authoritarianism and a commitment to justice and livable futures—necessarily lived together (“le vivre ensemble”)—within Cameroon.

Conclusion: Pan-Cameroonian Solidarities

Working from provocations offered by Black and African Geographies, I centered the perspectives of political activists and recognize Cameroon as a site of meaningful political contestation and worldmaking. Thinking through and with activist stories, I have demystified the state’s tactics of demonizing anti-state dissenters as “terrorists” and “foreigners” or as funded, supported, and educated by foreigners. Political activists in Cameroon face imprisonment, torture, public humiliation, and death at the hands of the security state. Yet, they refused to wait for “world powers” or the “international community” to intervene and criticize the Biya government or provide a solution for meaningful peace and well-being in the country. When I was in Yaoundé in September 2023, many of the people I spoke with were galvanized by the international attention given to anti-imperial and anti-French resistance in Mali and Niger. Activists acknowledged the pitfalls of foreign interventionism as a principal impetus for ecological, economic, and social justice in the context of ongoing economic interventionism.

We need research that analyses the multiple forms and features of Pan-Cameroonian resistance and worldmaking. In Cameroon, scholarship in the Anglophone social sciences has yet to sufficiently engage with work in the Francophone social sciences (and vice versa, although to a lesser extent given the global domination of the English language), leading to a sequestering of analyses of political struggle. Yet, activists in Yaoundé spoke of the significance of Pan-Cameroonian movement building and solidarity. Many ostensibly “francophone” activists (they would turn away from this title and the divisions it concretizes) often-times had been directly involved in peace movements and political discussions urgently pressing for peace in the Anglophone regions. The space for Francophone-Anglophone dialogue and sharing experiences of repression exists in Cameroon, but political and economic elites have actively discouraged cross-linguistic sharing and resistance “literacy” (Spivak 1999; see also Sundberg 2014, 34). A rich literature in both languages has demonstrated how hegemonic actors work to dismiss solidarities and deliberately discourage alliance-building. Understanding and conceiving of slow dissent as time-intensive, intergenerational, holistic, and less issue-centric might contribute to our understanding of cross-pollinations and strategic alliances, thus propelling us toward different interpretations of solidarity politics in contemporary Cameroon.

While rejecting liberal interventionism and remaining attentive to how the state has attempted to misappropriate an anti-imperial mantle, activists remain vigilant to the possibilities and weaknesses of transnational cooperation and solidarity. They responded to presidential invisibilities, ethnically divisive propaganda, and a largely absentee international sphere by cyclically occupying international spaces and confronting what activists characterize as the unbearable political “passivity” of those manipulated or indoctrinated (whom they call “sardines” and “zombies”). Cameroonian political activists mobilized to pressure, humiliate, and expose a common enemy, one who would instead remain hidden: the lion of Etoudi. We are witnessing a galvanization of dedication to Pan-African (Ndiaye 2023) and Pan-Cameroonian solidarity. Questions of reparative, economic,

and gender justice and the politics of coalition building remain front and center for many of these activists. From Geneva to Yaoundé and Paris to Buea, transnational solidarity networks among global anti-imperial and diaspora groups seek to foster political pathways for livable futures.

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