

DEVELOPED WITHIN THE
Southern Cameroons Legal Clarity Framework

WHAT HAS NOT BEEN DONE FOR 65 YEARS

Southern Cameroons, Legal Completion,
and the Missing Institutional Work

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*A public-facing policy paper on international legal status, institutional accountability,
and the completion of the Southern Cameroons trusteeship process.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This paper addresses a problem of legal incompleteness. Southern Cameroons passed through an international trusteeship process that formally ended in 1961. Sixty-five years later, the instruments that were supposed to conclude that process have never been publicly identified, examined, or verified in the manner that international law and sound governance require.

The result has not been a solved question. It has been an unresolved one, managed through political pressure, displacement of populations, decades of armed conflict, and the systematic absence of institutional accountability. This paper does not argue for any particular political outcome. It argues for lawful closure. It asks what was done, what was not done, and what must now be done to bring this matter to a credible and durable conclusion.

SECTION I

Introduction

The Southern Cameroons question is frequently described as a political dispute. That framing obscures its actual character. At its foundation, it is a question of legal completion: whether the process by which Southern Cameroons was transitioned out of international trusteeship was carried out in accordance with the legal standards that governed it.

This distinction matters. Political disputes are settled by negotiation, by elections, by the shifting weight of power. Legal questions are settled by evidence. They require identifying what instruments were created, what authority produced them, who signed them, and whether they were ratified and registered in the manner that international law prescribes.

For 65 years, this work has not been done. Not by the Cameroonian state. Not by the United Nations. Not by the successor institutions of British colonial administration. And not, with sufficient discipline, by those who have advocated for the Southern Cameroons population. This paper explains why, and charts a way forward.

A political dispute can be managed. A legal question must be answered. The Southern Cameroons question has been treated as the former when it is, at its core, the latter.

SECTION II

The System Producing the Confusion

No crisis of this complexity sustains itself without a system that rewards its continuation. To understand why the Southern Cameroons question remains unresolved, one must ask: what institutional environment produces this behavior? What does that environment reward, and what does it punish?

Weak institutions punish precision and reward performance. When the mechanisms for verifying claims are absent or corrupt, the actor who shouts loudest captures the most attention. Slogans replace

evidence. Factional identity replaces legal argument. Emotional appeal displaces institutional accountability. Survival tactics substitute for long-term strategy.

Strong institutions reverse these incentives. They reward those who can produce documentation, sustain arguments under scrutiny, and build coalitions on the basis of verifiable claims rather than shared grievance. In such environments, discipline compounds. In weak ones, noise does.

The Southern Cameroons conversation has operated primarily within a weak institutional environment. Diaspora movements, armed factions, advocacy organizations, and diplomatic interlocutors have each brought their own incentives to the conversation. Few have been structurally rewarded for getting the legal question right. Many have been rewarded for keeping the question alive as a political resource.

The Cameroonian state has likewise benefited from vagueness. A clear legal answer, in either direction, would impose obligations. Sustained ambiguity imposes none. The absence of institutional pressure to produce documentation has served those who prefer the status quo.

SECTION III

What Was Right in the Conversation

It would be both inaccurate and ungenerous to dismiss what has been argued. Some of it is correct, and its correctness deserves recognition.

It is correct that Southern Cameroons had a distinct international legal identity. Under the United Nations trusteeship system, Southern Cameroons was administered by the United Kingdom but was not a British territory in the sovereign sense. The distinction matters: administration is not ownership. British authority over the territory was conditional, limited, and internationally supervised.

It is correct that UNGA Resolution 1514 expressed a firm decolonization principle: that peoples under colonial or trusteeship arrangements had the right to self-determination. This principle was not rhetorical. It carried normative weight within the international legal order of its time and continues to carry interpretive weight today.

It is correct that the plebiscite of February 1961 produced a vote and that the vote carried legal consequences. The population of Southern Cameroons voted to join La Republique du Cameroun rather than Nigeria. That result was the starting point of a legal transition. The question is whether the transition was completed.

SECTION IV

What Was Only Partially Right

Accuracy requires distinguishing what is fully established from what is only partially so. Several propositions in this conversation are partially right, but have been advanced as if they were conclusive. This overstating of partial truths has damaged the credibility of the broader argument.

UNGA Resolution 1608, which addressed the outcome of the plebiscite and the next steps for Southern Cameroons, is operationally more central than Resolution 1514. It is the instrument that pointed toward the implementation arrangements for the territory's future. Yet it has received far less careful analysis than the more rhetorically accessible language of 1514. The operational question is not what principle applied, but whether the steps required by Resolution 1608 were carried out, by whom, and how.

Similarly, the argument that the union was always illegal is not the same as the argument that the union was never lawfully completed. The first is a conclusion. The second is a question. Legal observers and international actors respond more readily to open questions than to predetermined conclusions. Precision here is not pedantry. It is strategy.

The difference between 'this was illegal' and 'this was never lawfully completed' is the difference between a political claim and a legal one. Only one of them demands an answer.

SECTION V

The Main Misconceptions

Several recurring misconceptions have consumed time, resources, and credibility. They deserve direct identification.

The misconception that international sympathy equals legal traction. Sympathy from foreign governments, human rights organizations, and diaspora networks does not constitute legal pressure on the core question. International actors can sympathize with a population while declining to engage with the underlying legal status claim. Sympathy is not leverage. Documentation is.

The misconception that the plebiscite itself resolved the question. A plebiscite is not a constitution. It records a preference. The legal transition of a territory from trusteeship into a new constitutional relationship requires more than a recorded preference. It requires instruments that create, define, and bind the new relationship. The question is whether those instruments exist.

The misconception that armed conflict advances the legal argument. Violence, wherever it has occurred in this conflict, has not produced legal clarity. It has produced displacement, casualties, destroyed infrastructure, and hardened positions. It has given the Cameroonian state grounds to characterize the question as a security matter rather than a legal one, and has made international engagement more difficult, not less.

The misconception that time itself establishes legitimacy. Sixty-five years of administrative control is not the same as sixty-five years of lawful constitutional relationship. Duration does not substitute for documentation. The question of legal completion is not closed by the passage of time alone.

SECTION VI

What Has Not Been Done for 65 Years

The central failure of this period has been the failure to do institutional work. By institutional work, this paper means the systematic, documented, publicly verifiable effort to identify the legal instruments that supposedly completed the Southern Cameroons transition, to examine their authority and validity, and to build a record that can withstand scrutiny in international legal and diplomatic settings.

No government, international body, or advocacy institution has produced a comprehensive legal memorandum that answers the following: What instrument or instruments lawfully incorporated Southern Cameroons into La Republique du Cameroun? What was their legal basis? Who were the parties? Who signed? How were they ratified? Where are they registered? What international body

received and acknowledged them?

The absence of this record is not an administrative oversight. It is a structural condition of the problem. And it is the opening through which a disciplined legal and institutional strategy can enter.

What has also not been done is the building of institutions capable of carrying this argument over time. Movements have come and gone. Leaders have emerged and been discredited, arrested, exiled, or divided. Coalitions have formed and fractured. None of this represents institutional development. It represents political activity without an institutional foundation.

Sixty-five years of advocacy without documentation is sixty-five years of motion without progress. The work that was not done was not the marching. It was the filing.

SECTION VII

Why This Has Weakened Local and International Support

Those who have followed this question from the outside, whether as diplomats, legal scholars, or international civil servants, are not unsympathetic to the population of the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The humanitarian record is troubling. The documentation of abuses is substantial. The displacement is real.

But humanitarian concern does not automatically translate into legal or political engagement with the status question. For that engagement to occur, international actors need to be presented with a clear, legally framed, documentably supported claim. They need to see that the people making the claim have done the institutional work. They need a brief they can act on, not a grievance they can only mourn.

The factional nature of the anglophone advocacy landscape has compounded this problem. When there is no authoritative institutional voice making a consistent, disciplined argument, international actors default to treating the matter as an internal Cameroonian affair, best handled through dialogue programs that do not touch the underlying legal question. This is not hostility. It is the rational response to institutional incoherence.

SECTION VIII

The Missing Institutional Work

What is required now is not a new political movement. It is a different kind of work entirely. The following institutional tasks have not been completed and must be undertaken.

Legal Documentation. A comprehensive legal memorandum must be produced, by qualified international lawyers, examining every instrument that has been cited as completing the Southern Cameroons transition. This includes the Fomuban Conference arrangements of 1961, the Federal Constitution of 1961, and subsequent constitutional instruments. Each must be assessed for its legal authority, its conformity with the trusteeship framework, and its capacity to constitute a binding international legal act.

Archival Research. The relevant archives, including those of the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the Government of Cameroon, must be systematically examined. Instruments that claim to complete an international legal process must be locatable in international archives. If they are not, that absence is itself legally significant.

Institutional Consolidation. The advocacy environment must develop a mechanism for coordinating the legal argument. This does not require unanimity on political outcomes. It requires agreement that the legal question will be pursued through legal means, with legal rigor, by institutions that can be held accountable for the quality of their work.

Diplomatic Engagement. The legal memorandum, once produced, must be brought to the relevant international bodies and interested states in a form that demands a response. This is not lobbying. It is the presentation of a legal question to the appropriate forums.

SECTION IX

The Strongest Public Doctrine

The strongest available doctrine for this matter is not the broadest one. It is the most precise one. Precision is not a concession to the opposing position. It is the foundation of credibility.

The doctrine should be stated as follows:

Southern Cameroons was subject to an international trusteeship process governed by the United Nations Charter, the Trusteeship Agreement of 1946, and subsequent General Assembly resolutions, including Resolution 1608 of 1961. That process required lawful completion. Lawful completion requires identifiable instruments with clear legal authority. Those instruments have not been publicly identified and verified. Until they are, the legal status of Southern Cameroons in relation to La Republique du Cameroun remains an open question under international law, not a closed one.

This doctrine does not predetermine the answer. It demands one. And in international legal and diplomatic settings, a well-formed question is often more powerful than a predetermined answer.

We pray like everything depends on God, but we work hard like everything depends on us.

SECTION X

The Way Forward

The way forward does not require a revolution in the political landscape. It requires a revolution in approach. The following priorities represent the minimum institutional agenda for meaningful progress.

First: Establish the legal record. Commission and publish a rigorous legal memorandum on the completion question. Make it available to scholars, diplomats, and the public. Subject it to peer review. Let it speak for itself.

Second: Separate the humanitarian from the legal. The humanitarian situation in the Northwest and Southwest regions is urgent and real. It must be addressed on its own terms, through the appropriate channels, without waiting for legal resolution. The legal question and the humanitarian question are related but not identical. Conflating them weakens both.

Third: Build durable institutions. Any organization claiming to represent the interests of the Southern Cameroons population must demonstrate institutional accountability. This means published governance structures, transparent finances, defined mandates, and a track record of disciplined public communication.

Fourth: Engage the United Nations directly. The UN was the supervising authority over the trusteeship process. It has institutional memory and legal obligations that have not been fully exercised. A formal request to the UN Secretary-General or the relevant committee to examine the completion of the 1961 trusteeship process is an appropriate and proportionate next step.

Fifth: Win the argument before winning the outcome. The Southern Cameroons question will not be resolved by force. It will be resolved when the legal argument is so clearly made, so carefully documented, and so consistently presented that it can no longer be ignored. That requires patience, discipline, and institutional investment that has not yet been made.

SECTION XI

Core Public Question

All of the analysis in this paper resolves into a single public question. It is not a rhetorical question. It is a legal one, and it deserves a public answer.

What legal instrument lawfully completed the transition of Southern Cameroons from UN trusteeship into a valid constitutional relationship with La Republique du Cameroun, what is its name, who were the parties, who signed it, how was it ratified, and where is it registered?

This question has not been answered. It has been avoided, deflected, and buried under decades of political positioning by all sides. The demand that it now be answered, publicly and precisely, is not aggression. It is accountability.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Southern Cameroons has waited 65 years not because the world has been indifferent, but because the work has not been done. The legal question has not been asked with sufficient precision. The documentation has not been assembled with sufficient rigor. The institutions have not been built with sufficient discipline.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a diagnosis. And a diagnosis, honestly made, is the beginning of competent action.

The path forward is not louder advocacy. It is better work. It is the kind of work that produces documents, builds institutions, and places a well-formed legal question before the bodies that are obligated to answer it. It is the kind of work that earns the respect of serious actors by demonstrating that the people making the argument have taken it seriously themselves.

What has not been done for 65 years can be done now. Not because the moment is uniquely favorable, but because the standard of institutional work required has always been the same, and it has always been achievable. The question is whether those who carry this cause are willing to meet it.

Sixty-five years is not a verdict. It is a delay. The question remains open. The work begins now.

APPENDIX

Back-Cover Summary

Southern Cameroons passed through an international trusteeship process that formally ended in 1961. Sixty-five years later, the legal instruments that were supposed to complete that process have never been publicly identified, examined, or verified. This white paper argues that the Southern Cameroons question is not a political dispute awaiting negotiation, but a legal question awaiting documentation. It diagnoses the institutional environment that has allowed this ambiguity to persist, separates strong claims from weak ones, identifies the misconceptions that have wasted decades, and presents a disciplined way forward. The standard required has always been the same. What changes now is the willingness to meet it.

APPENDIX B

Alternative Titles

The Unfinished Business of 1961: Southern Cameroons and the Missing Legal Instruments

Legal Completion or Legal Fiction: The Southern Cameroons Trusteeship Question

What Was Never Closed: Southern Cameroons and the Governance of Unresolved Status

The Missing Instruments: Southern Cameroons, Trusteeship, and the Demand for Documentation

Sixty-Five Years Without an Answer: The Southern Cameroons Legal Completion Question

APPENDIX C

Pull Quotes for Design Layout

"A political dispute can be managed. A legal question must be answered."

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"Sixty-five years is not a verdict. It is a delay. The question remains open. The work begins now."
