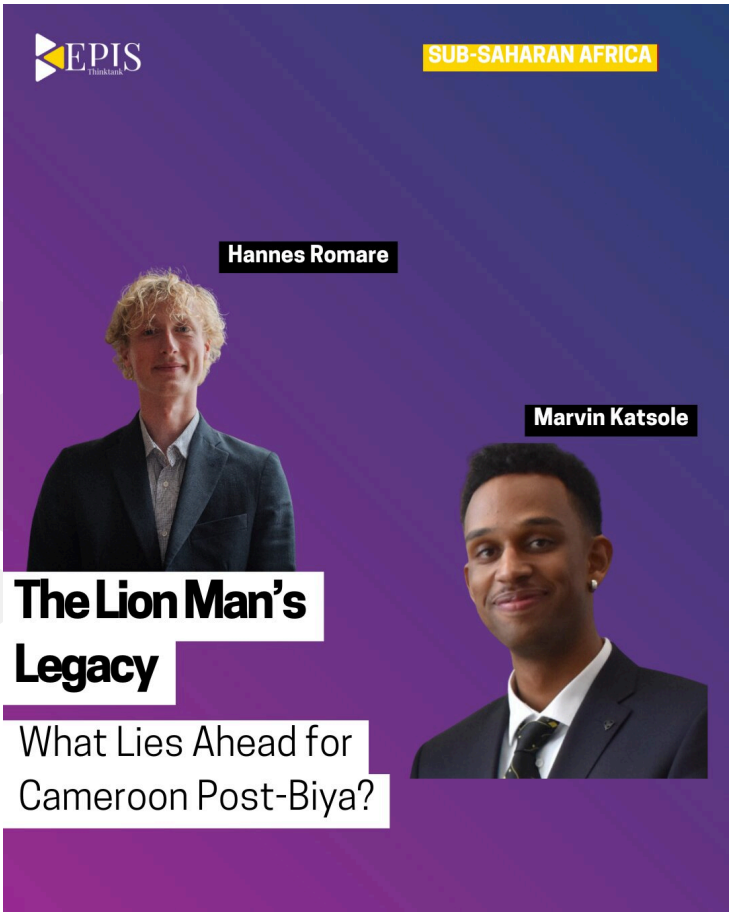
The Lion Man's Legacy

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Hannes Romare and Marvin Katsole



1. Introduction

43 years. That is how long the President of Cameroon, Paul Biya, has been in power. President Biya is 92 years old and rumours concerning his health condition have been circulating. Biya does however not show any signs of wanting to step down, even being urged by supporters to run for an eight term as president. Presidential elections are to be held in October 2025, and even if Biya gets re-elected, it is highly uncertain if he would survive another 7-year term due to his old age. Having served as president since 1982, there is no clear successor to the 'Lion Man'. This makes one wonder, what happens to Cameroon after his death?

The question of a post-Biya Cameroon is one without a certain answer. Through a neo-patrimonial system, Biya has been able to play off different elites against each other, concentrating the power to one sole person, himself. By hollowing out the constitution and institutionalising nepotism and patronage, Biya has created a Cameroon designed to be ruled by him and no one else. While this has been a success for him, it has now created a situation that paves the way for chaos the day he passes away. Local elites, both within and outside of his political party, the "Cameroon People's Democratic Movement" (CPDM), will scramble for power over the country and the access to its rich reserves of oil, gas, mineral, and timber. This could lead to erratic and fractious governance of the country as corruption is already high. Even worse, it could spiral into violent conflict and civil war.

2. The Anglophone Crisis

Cameroon is already experiencing intra-state conflict. There is an on-going conflict between government forces and separatist forces in the anglophone regions of the country. The roots of the separatists grievances can be traced back to the formation of a single Cameroonian state in 1972 consisting of former British and French colonial territories. The conflict turned violent in 2017 when the Ambazonia Defence Forces began attacking government forces in a move to establish a new state called Ambazonia, consisting of Cameroon's anglophone regions. Since then, the conflict has claimed over 6500 lives and displaced 765 000 people, not to mention the 1.8 million people in need of humanitarian aid.

In a post-Biya Cameroon, the Ambazonian separatists would be able to leverage the fragility of the state to push further their agenda. More violence and suffering would ensue as the government would not let their anglophone regions break away from the state. The state would not easily want to give up their oil extractions in the region, neither the already existing ones at Rio del Rey, nor the various oil prospects that have been found. Both sides are already accused of violating human rights. This includes human rights violations such as torture, extrajudicial killings, and the burning of villages. Intensified fighting and an escalation of the conflict would lead to more human rights violations and suffering.

3. Regional Implications

The situation in Cameroon is not only a domestic issue but one that could affect the region's stability and security. Cameroon is an important actor within the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). It is home to an inter-regional maritime coordination center that links ECCAS to ECOWAS. Cameroon is also one of the strongest economies in the regional organisation and an exporter of Zinc, Zinc articles, and cocoa, which are in high demand amongst the ECCAS member countries. If the Cameroonian State was to collapse, it would not only disrupt the regional economy but also affect maritime collaboration between the ECCAS and ECOWAS.

Furthermore, an escalation of the anglophone crisis would displace more civilians and create migration waves to the bordering country Nigeria who is already experiencing a decline in stability. One should also not forget the around 352 000 refugees from the Central African Republic hosted in Cameroon. If the country falls into chaos, many of these would probably be displaced anew. Cameroon is also a key actor of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) fighting against Boko Haram. If Cameroon was to collapse, not only would MNJTF lose valuable military power, it would also strengthen Boko Haram who are already operating in the Far North of the country. The war with Boko Haram has already claimed the lives of more than 3000 Cameroonians and displaced over 250 000. A Cameroon in chaos would therefore not only affect its own population but it would also result in spill-overs into the already unstable neighbours Chad, the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

4. Conclusion

Cameron stands at a critical crossroads. The potential end of President Biya's decades-long rule raises uncertainties about the country's future. His concentration of power and the lack of a clear succession plan have hollowed out state institutions and fostered a fragile political environment vulnerable to unrest and conflict. The Anglophone crisis, already a dire humanitarian situation, could escalate further in a weakened post-Biya state, fueling more violence and displacement. Regionally, a destabilised Cameroon could have far-reaching consequences. The escalation of internal conflict could displace millions, weaken regional cooperation, and embolden extremist groups like Boko Haram. The economic and humanitarian consequences would be felt through Central and West Africa, destabilising fragile neighbours and undermining security initiatives.

The question of Cameroon's fate post-Biya should worry the international community if one wants to create stability and prosperity in West- and Central Africa. The international community needs to support and aid the civil society within Cameroon in order to create a strong democratic movement ready to step in when Biya steps down. With a strong civil society, ready to hold politicians and policy-makers accountable, combined with external international pressure, the succession of Biya could actually go smoothly and without spiralling into chaos and conflict. A strong, pro-democratic civil society could lead the way for much needed reform in Cameroon, leading to a more secure and just society for all. If the international community does nothing, and the day of Biya's death arrives, Cameroon may very well collapse and turn into another example of a country falling apart post-despot.