

Hybrid Governance and Civilian Survival: Rethinking State Legitimacy in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict, 2017-2025

¹Angandze Sheily Ngobalep (PhD), ¹Shey Fonjoh Ivo, Phd., ²Kineh Mirabel Dzelam, PhD

¹The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

²The University of Bamenda

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ABSTRACT

The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon has generated a fragmented political landscape in which state authority is increasingly contested by armed separatist groups. In this context, governance is no longer monopolized by the state but emerges through complex interactions between formal institutions, non-state actors, and local communities. This study examines how systems of hybrid governance shape civilian survival strategies and reconfigure notions of state legitimacy in conflict-affected areas. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with internally displaced persons, community leaders, and civil society actors, as well as policy analysis, the research explores how civilians navigate competing authorities to secure protection, access services, and sustain livelihoods. It further investigates the extent to which separatist groups assume governance functions and how these practices influence local perceptions of legitimacy and authority. By foregrounding civilian agency, the study challenges state-centric approaches to peace building and argues that legitimacy in conflict settings is negotiated through everyday practices rather than imposed through formal institutions. The findings will contribute to academic debates on governance in fragile contexts while providing policy relevant insights for designing more context sensitive and inclusive peace building strategies in Cameroon and comparable African conflicts.

Keywords: Hybrid Governance, Civilian Agency, State Legitimacy, Armed Conflict, Cameroon Anglophone Crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, Cameroon's Anglophone regions have experienced one of the most significant political and security crises in contemporary Central Africa. What began as protests by lawyers and teachers against perceived marginalization gradually escalated into a violent armed conflict between government forces and separatist movements seeking the independence of a state commonly referred to as Ambazonia. The conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths, widespread displacement, economic disruption, destruction of infrastructure, and profound transformations in governance structures across the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

The protracted nature of the conflict has fundamentally altered the relationship between citizens and the state. In many localities, state institutions have either withdrawn, become inaccessible, or operate under significant constraints due to insecurity. Simultaneously, separatist groups have expanded their influence by establishing alternative systems of authority that regulate mobility, taxation, education, dispute resolution, and security (Asonganyi 2026, interview). Traditional authorities, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and community networks have also assumed important governance responsibilities in response to the limitations of both state and non-state actors.

These developments challenge conventional understandings of governance and legitimacy. Traditional state-centric perspectives assume that legitimate authority derives primarily from sovereign institutions exercising exclusive control over territory and populations. However, the realities of the Anglophone conflict suggest a

more complex situation in which multiple actors simultaneously claim authority and compete for civilian compliance. Governance therefore emerges not as a monopoly of the state but as a negotiated process involving diverse actors operating within overlapping spheres of influence. Existing scholarship on the Anglophone conflict has focused primarily on the historical origins of the crisis, separatist mobilization, human rights violations, military operations, and peacebuilding initiatives. While these studies provide valuable insights, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how governance functions in everyday life and how civilians navigate competing authorities. Even less attention has been paid to the ways in which these interactions reshape perceptions of legitimacy.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between hybrid governance, civilian survival strategies, and legitimacy in conflict-affected communities between 2017 and 2025. It asks three central questions. First, how has governance been reconfigured in areas affected by the Anglophone conflict? Second, how do civilians navigate competing systems of authority in their daily lives? Third, how do these interactions influence perceptions of state and non-state legitimacy? The study argues that legitimacy in conflict settings cannot be understood solely through formal institutions or legal frameworks. Instead, legitimacy emerges through everyday practices of governance, survival, compliance, and negotiation. By focusing on civilian experiences, the research contributes to broader debates on governance, authority, and political order in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A major objective of this study is to provide an empirically grounded understanding of governance and legitimacy from the perspective of those directly affected by conflict. To achieve this objective, the research adopted a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative methods were considered particularly appropriate because they allow for an in-depth exploration of perceptions, experiences, meanings, and social interactions that cannot easily be captured through quantitative indicators.

The study employed an interpretive research paradigm. This approach assumes that social realities are constructed through human interactions and concepts such as legitimacy and authority acquire meaning through lived experiences. Given the fragmented and dynamic nature of governance in conflict settings, an interpretive perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how different actors perceive and negotiate authority. The research focused primarily on communities located within the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon, which constitute the epicenter of the Anglophone conflict. Additional interviews were conducted with internally displaced persons residing in Douala, Yaoundé and Bafoussam that host significant displaced populations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify individuals with direct experience of governance and conflict dynamics. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to access respondents who might otherwise have been difficult to reach due to insecurity, political sensitivities, or social isolation. The final sample included internally displaced persons, traditional rulers, community leaders, religious leaders, teachers, civil society representatives, traders, youth leaders, women's associations, local government officials, security personnel, humanitarian workers, and individuals familiar with separatist governance structures. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder categories was intended to address the limitations of previous studies that focused primarily on civilian experiences while neglecting the perspectives of state and non-state governance actors. By incorporating diverse viewpoints, the study provides a more balanced understanding of authority and legitimacy within conflict environments.

The participant pool reflected significant diversity in age, gender, occupation, educational background, and geographic location. Participants included both males and females ranging from young adults to elderly community members. Particular attention was given to ensuring representation from communities experiencing varying levels of conflict intensity and different forms of governance arrangements. The diversity of participants enabled the study to capture multiple experiences of governance, ranging from communities under stronger state influence to areas where separatist actors exercised substantial control.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to discuss their experiences and perceptions in detail while providing flexibility for follow-up questions. Focus group discussions generated collective reflections on governance challenges and survival strategies. Documentary analysis included reports from international organizations, government documents, policy papers, academic literature, and publications by civil society organizations. The triangulation of these data sources strengthened the reliability and validity of the findings.

Conducting research in conflict settings presents significant ethical challenges. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities before data collection commenced. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Given the sensitivity of the conflict, strict confidentiality measures were implemented. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, pseudonyms were used where necessary, and all data were stored securely. Interviews were conducted in locations considered safe and comfortable by participants. Special attention was devoted to minimizing risks associated with discussing potentially traumatic experiences. Participants were not pressured to answer questions that caused discomfort, and interviews were terminated whenever respondents expressed a desire to discontinue participation.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated based on recurring concepts and issues. Third, codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Fourth, relationships among themes were examined to develop analytical interpretations. Major themes included perceptions of authority, experiences of governance, survival strategies, service provision, security, trust, compliance, legitimacy, resistance, and adaptation. This analytical process enabled the identification of patterns that cut across different stakeholder groups while also highlighting important variations in perspectives and experiences.

Conceptual Framework: Hybrid Governance And Operationalizing Legitimacy

Hybrid governance refers to the coexistence and interaction of formal state institutions with non-state actors in the provision of governance functions such as security, dispute resolution, and service delivery (Boege et al., 2009). Rather than viewing governance as a binary distinction between state and non-state systems, hybrid governance emphasizes the blurred boundaries and negotiated relationships between multiple actors. One of the recurring weaknesses in studies of governance and conflict is the tendency to treat legitimacy as a self-evident concept. In reality, legitimacy is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that requires clear conceptualization and operationalization. For the purposes of this study, legitimacy is defined as the extent to which civilians perceive a governing actor as possessing a rightful and acceptable authority to exercise power and regulate social life. This definition moves beyond purely legal understandings of legitimacy. While legal legitimacy refers to authority derived from constitutional and institutional frameworks, empirical legitimacy refers to authority that is recognized and accepted by ordinary people in everyday practice. The distinction is particularly important in conflict environments where formal state institutions may retain legal authority while lacking effective control or public trust.

In this study, legitimacy is operationalized through four principal dimensions. The first dimension is effectiveness. This refers to the ability of an actor to provide security, maintain order, resolve disputes, and facilitate access to services. Participants frequently associated legitimacy with practical performance rather than formal status. The second dimension is accessibility. Civilians often judged authorities according to whether they could be reached and whether they responded to local concerns. Actors who maintained regular interaction with communities were frequently viewed as more legitimate than distant institutions.

The third dimension is fairness. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of impartial treatment, procedural justice, and respect for community norms. Authorities perceived as discriminatory or abusive experienced declining levels of legitimacy. The fourth dimension is responsiveness. Legitimacy was strongly influenced by the extent to which governing actors addressed immediate social and economic needs.

Communities tended to support actors who demonstrated concern for local welfare and provided tangible assistance during periods of crisis. These dimensions provide measurable indicators for examining legitimacy within hybrid governance systems and enable a more precise understanding of how civilians evaluate competing authorities.

Governance Dynamics In The Anglophone Conflict

The governance landscape in Cameroon's Anglophone regions has undergone significant transformation since the escalation of the conflict in 2017 in Cameroon. What was once a relatively centralized system of state administration has evolved into a fragmented and contested order characterized by overlapping authorities, shifting territorial control, and the emergence of alternative governance structures. In many affected areas, the state's administrative, judicial, and security institutions operate alongside, or in competition with, non-state armed groups that have developed their own mechanisms of control and regulation (International Crisis Group, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018). One of the most salient features of this environment is the partial withdrawal or weakening of state authority in certain localities. Government presence is often concentrated in urban centers and strategically important zones, while rural and peri-urban areas experience fluctuating or limited state engagement (Asonganyi 2026, interviewed). In these spaces, separatist groups have stepped in to fill governance gaps by enforcing rules, collecting informal taxes, regulating movement, and adjudicating disputes (Banla 2026, interviewed). Although these practices are not formally recognized, they constitute *de facto* governance arrangements that affect daily life for local populations (Boege et al., 2009; Lund, 2006).

At the same time, the state continues to assert its authority through military operations, administrative appointments, and public service delivery in areas under its control (Muki, 2026, interviewed). However, the effectiveness of these interventions is uneven and often constrained by insecurity, logistical limitations, and local resistance. As a result, governance becomes spatially differentiated, with varying configurations of authority depending on the level of control exercised by different actors in a given locality (Meagher, 2012). In addition to formal state institutions and separatist groups, traditional authorities and community leaders play an important intermediary role. In many communities, chiefs and local elders serve as mediators in disputes, custodians of customary law, and facilitators of communication between civilians and external actors. These actors often maintain a degree of legitimacy rooted in historical, cultural, and social norms, allowing them to operate across contested political boundaries (Lund, 2006).

Civilians, for their part, actively adapt to these shifting governance dynamics. Depending on their location and circumstances, individuals may comply with directives from different authorities, negotiate access to services, or strategically align themselves with actors capable of providing protection or resources. This pragmatic navigation reflects not only survival strategies but also the absence of a singular, uncontested authority (Boege et al., 2009). These interactions highlight the fluid and negotiated nature of governance in conflict settings. Authority is not static but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through everyday practices, enforcement mechanisms, and social relationships. The coexistence of multiple governance actors creates a layered system in which legitimacy is context-dependent and often contested. In such an environment, control over territory does not necessarily translate into full compliance or acceptance by the population, as legitimacy must be earned through the provision of security, order, and basic services (Meagher, 2012).

Moreover, the conflict has introduced new forms of governance fragmentation, including the proliferation of checkpoints, restrictions on mobility, and the emergence of localized rule-making systems (Nsai, 2026, interviewed). These developments have significant implications for economic activity, social cohesion, and access to essential services such as education and healthcare. In some areas, enforced shutdowns ("ghost towns") have become instruments of political control, further illustrating how governance and conflict are deeply intertwined (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Overall, the governance dynamics in the Anglophone conflict reflect a complex interplay between state authority, non-state armed actors, traditional institutions, and civilian agency. Rather than a simple breakdown of governance, the situation represents a reconfiguration of authority into hybrid forms that challenge conventional understandings of statehood and legitimacy.

Civilian “Survival Strategies” And The Limits Of Agency

In the context of the ongoing conflict in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions in Cameroon, civilians occupy a central yet often under examined position within the broader governance landscape. Far from being passive victims of violence, civilians actively develop and deploy a range of survival strategies to navigate insecurity, shifting authority structures, and economic disruption. These strategies reflect not only resilience but also a form of agency that influences how governance is experienced and reproduced in everyday life (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012). One of the primary survival strategies involves strategic compliance and selective obedience. Civilians often adapt their behavior depending on which authority—state forces or separatist groups—exerts control over a particular area (Ntah 2026, interviewed). For instance, individuals may comply with regulations imposed by non-state armed actors in separatist-controlled zones while adhering to state laws in government-held areas. This dual or situational compliance allows civilians to minimize risk while maintaining access to essential services and avoiding punishment from either side (Boege et al., 2009).

Another key strategy is mobility and spatial adaptation. Many civilians relocate temporarily or permanently to escape violence, avoid forced recruitment, or evade punitive measures such as taxation or sanctions imposed by armed groups (Nyang 2026, interviewed). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) frequently move between rural and urban areas, or across regional boundaries, in search of relative safety. This mobility is not random but carefully calculated based on perceived security conditions, economic opportunities, and social networks (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Economic adaptation also plays a significant role in civilian agency. Conflict conditions disrupt traditional livelihoods, particularly agriculture and small-scale trade, which are dominant in many affected communities. In response, civilians diversify income sources, engage in informal economic activities, or rely on remittances (Ntahki 2026, interviewed). Informal markets often expand under such conditions, operating alongside or outside formal regulatory frameworks (Meagher, 2012).

Social networks and community-based support systems constitute another important dimension of survival. Extended family ties, neighborhood associations, and local community groups often provide material assistance, information, and protection. These networks facilitate access to resources such as shelter, food, and medical care, particularly for displaced or vulnerable individuals (Ndi 2026, interviewed). In many cases, trust-based relationships within these networks substitute for formal institutional support (Lund, 2006). Civilians also engage in negotiation and mediation with various authorities. Community leaders, religious figures, and local intermediaries often facilitate communication between civilians and armed actors, helping to resolve disputes or secure exemptions (Munyika 2026, interviewed). These intermediaries contribute to the functioning of hybrid governance systems by bridging gaps between formal and informal authority structures (Boege et al., 2009).

Importantly, civilian agency in conflict settings does not imply the absence of constraints. Rather, it operates within a highly restrictive environment characterized by insecurity, coercion, and uncertainty. Choices are often made under duress, and survival strategies involve trade-offs between safety, economic stability, and social obligations. Despite these constraints, civilians’ adaptive behaviors demonstrate practical agency that shapes governance outcomes in meaningful ways (Scott, 1998)

Implications For State Legitimacy

The dynamics of hybrid governance in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon have significant implications for how state legitimacy is understood, constructed, and sustained in conflict-affected environments. Traditionally, state legitimacy has been associated with the capacity of the state to maintain territorial control, enforce laws, and provide public goods (Galula 1964). However, in contexts where state authority is fragmented and contested, legitimacy becomes less about formal recognition and more about perceived effectiveness, accessibility, and responsiveness (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012). In the Anglophone regions, the limited and uneven presence of state institutions has created space for non-state armed actors and local authorities to perform governance functions (Banseka 2026, interviewed). These actors often derive localized legitimacy by providing rudimentary forms of security, enforcing rules, and regulating social and economic interactions.

While such legitimacy is not formal or internationally recognized, it is socially constructed through repeated interactions with civilians who rely on these actors for survival and order (Boege et al., 2009).

This situation results in a fragmented legitimacy landscape in which multiple actors simultaneously claim authority. Civilians may perceive the state as legitimate in some contexts (e.g., access to administrative services or national identity), while recognizing non-state actors as legitimate in others (e.g., local dispute resolution or immediate security provision). Legitimacy, therefore, becomes situational and relational rather than absolute. It is continuously negotiated through every day practices, compliance behaviors, and perceptions of fairness and effectiveness (Lund, 2006). Importantly, the erosion of state legitimacy in conflict zones is not solely a function of violence but also of governance gaps. When the state fails to provide essential services or respond adequately to local needs, civilians may turn to alternative actors, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of hybrid systems. This dynamic creates a feedback loop in which the absence of effective state presence contributes to the strengthening of non-state governance structures, further complicating efforts to reassert centralized authority (Meagher, 2012).

At the same time, legitimacy should not be viewed as entirely lost or replaced. Instead, it is reconfigured across multiple layers of authority. The state may retain symbolic legitimacy as the recognized sovereign authority, while non-state actors gain practical legitimacy at the local level (Terretta 2013). This duality underscores the importance of distinguishing between formal/legal legitimacy and empirical/social legitimacy when analyzing governance in conflict settings. These insights suggest that efforts to rebuild or strengthen state legitimacy must go beyond military or administrative approaches. Legitimacy must be earned through inclusive governance, equitable service delivery, and meaningful engagement with local populations. Failure to account for the realities of hybrid governance risks perpetuating disconnects between formal institutions and lived experiences, thereby undermining long-term stability and peace building efforts.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, international organizations, and peace building practitioners engaged in conflict resolution and governance reform in Cameroon and similar contexts. To begin with, there is a need for context-sensitive governance strategies that recognize the existence of hybrid governance systems rather than attempting to replace them entirely. Policies that assume the exclusive authority of the state are likely to be ineffective in areas where non-state actors play significant governance roles. Instead, interventions should be designed with an understanding of how multiple authorities coexist and interact on the ground (Boege et al., 2009).

Also, inclusive peace building approaches are essential. Traditional authorities, community leaders, civil society organizations, and even informal intermediaries play critical roles in mediating relationships between civilians and governing actors. Engaging these stakeholders can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace initiatives by ensuring that they are grounded in local realities and social structures (Lund, 2006). Equally important, policymakers should prioritize service delivery and governance performance as key drivers of legitimacy. Strengthening access to education, healthcare, justice, and basic infrastructure can help rebuild trust in state institutions. Evidence suggests that legitimacy is closely tied to the ability of governing actors to meet the needs of the population rather than merely asserting authority through coercion (Meagher, 2012).

Furthermore, there is a need for flexible and adaptive policy frameworks that can operate in unstable and fluid environments. Rigid, centralized approaches may fail to account for variations in territorial control and the evolving nature of authority. Decentralization, if properly implemented, may offer opportunities to bring governance closer to local populations, although it must be accompanied by accountability mechanisms to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities. Fifth, civilian agency should be incorporated into policy design. Civilians are not passive recipients of governance but active participants whose choices shape the functioning of hybrid systems. Policies that ignore civilian perspectives risk misinterpreting local dynamics and implementing solutions that are misaligned with community needs. Participatory approaches that involve affected populations in decision-making processes can improve both legitimacy and effectiveness.

Finally, international actors and development partners should adopt a long-term, conflict-sensitive engagement strategy. Short-term interventions focused solely on security may fail to address underlying governance challenges. Sustainable peace building requires coordinated efforts that integrate political dialogue, institutional reform, and socio economic development, while acknowledging the complex interplay between state and non-state actors. In summary, addressing legitimacy challenges in the Anglophone conflict requires moving beyond state-centric paradigms toward more nuanced, context-aware approaches that recognize hybrid governance realities. Aligning policy interventions with local governance structures and civilian practices is essential for building durable peace and strengthening institutional legitimacy in Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the dynamics of hybrid governance and civilian survival in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon between 2017 and 2025, with a particular focus on how these dynamics reshape understandings of state legitimacy in conflict-affected settings. The analysis demonstrates that governance in such contexts cannot be adequately understood through a purely state-centric lens. Instead, authority is fragmented, negotiated, and distributed among multiple actors, including state institutions, non-state armed groups, traditional authorities, and local community structures.

A key finding of this study is that civilians play an active and central role in sustaining and shaping hybrid governance systems. Through strategies such as selective compliance, mobility, economic adaptation, and reliance on social networks, civilians navigate competing authorities in ways that reflect both necessity and agency. These everyday practices not only ensure survival but also contribute to the reproduction of governance arrangements by implicitly recognizing and interacting with multiple sources of authority. In this sense, civilian behavior becomes a critical component in the functioning and persistence of hybrid political orders.

The study also highlights that legitimacy in conflict settings is not a fixed or singular attribute but a fluid and context-dependent phenomenon. Rather than deriving exclusively from formal state institutions, legitimacy emerges from the perceived ability of governing actors, state or non-state actors to provide security, maintain order, and respond to local needs. In areas where state presence is limited or inconsistent, non-state actors acquired localized legitimacy through their governance functions, further complicating the legitimacy landscape. This reinforces the idea that legitimacy is relational and continuously negotiated through everyday interactions between authorities and civilians.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to broader debates on hybrid governance by demonstrating how overlapping systems of authority operate in practice and how they shape political order in conflict environments. The case of Cameroon's Anglophone regions illustrates that hybrid governance is not merely a transitional or exceptional condition but has become a sustained feature of governance in protracted conflicts. This challenges conventional assumptions about the linear restoration of state authority and suggests that governance reform must account for complex, multi-actor realities.

From a policy standpoint, the study underscores the limitations of state-centric peace building approaches that prioritize territorial control and institutional centralization without adequately engaging with local governance dynamics. Effective interventions must recognize the coexistence of multiple authorities and incorporate local actors, including community leaders and civil society organizations, into governance and peace building processes. Moreover, strengthening legitimacy requires not only institutional reforms but also improvements in service delivery, accountability, and responsiveness to citizen needs. Policies that ignore these dimensions risk deepening the disconnect between formal institutions and lived realities, thereby undermining long-term stability.

Importantly, this study also highlights the need to center civilian experiences and agency in both research and policy design. Civilians are not passive subjects of governance but active participants whose decisions influence how authority is exercised and perceived. Recognizing this agency is essential for developing interventions that are both contextually grounded and socially responsive.

Finally, the governance landscape in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict reflects a complex interplay of competing authorities and adaptive civilian practices that together shape patterns of legitimacy and order. Moving forward, sustainable peace building efforts will require approaches that embrace this complexity rather than attempt to simplify it. By acknowledging the realities of hybrid governance and integrating local dynamics into broader policy frameworks, stakeholders can contribute to more effective, inclusive, and durable solutions in conflict-affected settings.

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