

Haunted Independence: The Ghost of Ambazonia in Cameroon's National Memory

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Abstract

Each October 1st, Cameroon confronts a past it has never fully resolved. The date marks the 1961 entry of British Southern Cameroons into union with the Republic of Cameroun, yet it was never firmly institutionalised by the post-colonial state. Instead, October 1st remains an uneasy and largely avoided anniversary, displaced by the celebration of May 20th as 'Unitary Day'. This suppressed temporal marker was fractured decisively during the 2017 crisis escalation, when separatists reasserted October 1st – a date commemorated since the early 1990s – to proclaim the independence of 'Ambazonia'. Since then, October 1st has become a symbolic battleground where memory, authority and legitimacy collide. While the state continues to evade official commemoration, the date is now marked through militarisation, lockdowns and enforced silence in the Anglophone regions. Competing flags, counter-narratives and coercive practices reveal how control over political time has become central to the conflict. This article examines how October 1st evolved from an avoided anniversary into a counter-anniversary, demonstrating that anniversaries in conflict settings are not neutral commemorations but contested instruments of power. It argues that without historical reckoning and

inclusive dialogue, Cameroon's unresolved mnemonic struggles will continue to destabilise its political future.

Keywords: *collective memory, Anglophone crisis, Ambazonia, national identity, postcolonial conflict, commemorative politics*

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Introduction

Anniversaries occupy a deceptively modest place in political life. Ostensibly marking the passage of time, they are often treated as ceremonial residues of past events rather than as active instruments of power (Secler 2025). Yet within international relations and domestic political orders alike, anniversaries function as political technologies through which authority is asserted, legitimacy is narrated, and collective identities are stabilised or contested (White 2019). By fixing particular interpretations of the past to specific dates, states seek to discipline historical meaning and organise political time in ways that naturalise existing power relations (McNeilly 2023). Conversely, challengers and dissident actors frequently mobilise anniversaries to disrupt these narratives, reclaim silenced histories or project alternative futures (Fitzsimmons 1998). In this sense, calendars are never neutral. They are sites of struggle where memory, sovereignty and political order intersect (Torbakov 2018).

While much scholarship has focused on celebrated anniversaries such as national independence days, revolutions or moments of triumph, less attention has been paid to anniversaries that are conspicuously avoided (Brownell 2021). Yet avoidance, no less than celebration, is a deeply political act. States may choose to suppress, displace or obscure certain dates precisely because they expose unresolved contradictions at the heart of the polity (Eglitis & Ardava 2011). Such avoided anniversaries linger as temporal absences, carrying unresolved meanings that refuse closure. It is in this analytical space that Cameroon's October 1st emerges as a particularly instructive case.

October 1st marks the 1961 entry of British Southern Cameroons into union with the *Republic of Cameroun* following a United Nations-supervised plebiscite (Ngoh 1979). Unlike many postcolonial founding dates, it was never firmly institutionalised as a national anniversary by the Cameroonian state. After the abolition of federalism in 1972 and the subsequent consolidation of a centralised unitary system, official commemorative attention shifted decisively to May 20th, celebrated as Unitary State Day (Konings 2011). October 1st was neither openly repudiated nor meaningfully commemorated; instead, it was left in a state of political suspension

– acknowledged as a historical fact, yet denied public ritual, symbolic affirmation or mnemonic investment. This deliberate avoidance transformed the date into an uneasy temporal remainder within Cameroon’s national memory.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this suppression that has endowed October 1st with enduring symbolic power. This suppressed temporal marker was fractured decisively during the current crisis that escalated in 2017, when Anglophone separatists aggressively reasserted October 1st – a date that had already been actively commemorated and heavily contested since the return of multiparty politics in the early 1990s to proclaim the independence of ‘Ambazonia’ (International Crisis Group 2017a). Each year since, it has been marked not by state ceremonies, but by militarisation, enforced lockdowns, and an atmosphere of fear and defiance in towns such as Buea and Bamenda (Foute 2024). Competing flags, rival narratives and coercive practices converge around a date the state officially avoids yet cannot neutralise (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2025). While the term ‘Ambazonia’ gained widespread currency at the onset of the current crisis to denote the envisioned independent state of the former British Southern Cameroons, it is important to contextualise its usage. Not all Anglophone Cameroonian nationalists or political actors identify with the term, as it is increasingly avoided by individuals and groups who dissociate themselves from the violence associated with the ongoing armed conflict.

This transformation raises a compelling empirical and theoretical puzzle: how can a date the state refuses to commemorate become one of the most politically explosive moments in an ongoing conflict? Why does avoidance, rather than erasure, appear to intensify the mnemonic and political significance of an anniversary? Addressing this question requires moving beyond an understanding of commemorative politics centred solely on celebration and spectacle, and instead examining the productive effects of silencing, displacement and securitisation.

This article advances the argument that Cameroon’s Anglophone crisis illustrates a broader dynamic in the politics of anniversaries: avoided anniversaries do not simply fade into irrelevance. On the contrary, when a state suppresses or displaces a foundational date without resolving the historical grievances attached to it, that date may return as a counter-anniversary (Giesen 2004). In such moments, challengers reclaim control over political time, transforming absence into accusation and silence into mobilisation. October 1st did not become politically potent despite its avoidance, but because of it. The state’s refusal to publicly reckon with the ambiguities of the 1961 union created the conditions under which separatist actors could reframe the date as a symbol of betrayal, unfinished decolonisation and denied self-determination (Djounguep 2021).

By foregrounding this dynamic, the article contributes to the thematic section in two key ways. First, it expands the analytical scope of anniversary politics beyond celebratory rituals to include practices of avoidance and displacement

as central mechanisms of power. Second, it demonstrates how anniversaries can become securitised temporal sites, where competing actors deploy coercion to regulate memory, loyalty and political presence. In Cameroon, October 1st has become a moment when the struggle over historical meaning directly shapes security practices, domestic governance and international advocacy, blurring the boundary between memory politics and conflict dynamics (Agwanda & Asal 2021).

The article combines historical reconstruction with discourse and symbolic analysis. It traces the evolution of October 1st from decolonisation through post-federal state-building to contemporary separatist mobilisation, examining state narratives, commemorative practices, and their deliberate absences. It examines official state narratives embedded in civic education and presidential discourse surrounding May 20th, alongside separatist rhetoric deployed in public declarations and digital spaces to reframe October 1st. Through this approach, the article treats anniversaries not as background markers of conflict, but as active sites where political authority is asserted and contested.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates October 1st within the incomplete closure of British Southern Cameroons' decolonisation and the subsequent displacement of the date by the celebration of May 20th. It then examines the reappropriation of October 1st by Ambazonian separatists and the securitisation of commemoration in the context of the Anglophone crisis. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of avoided anniversaries for conflict persistence and political reconciliation, arguing that without historical reckoning and inclusive mnemonic dialogue, the ghosts embedded in political calendars are unlikely to remain silent.

October 1st as a contested temporal site

To understand why October 1st has become such a volatile political marker in contemporary Cameroon, it is necessary to approach it not simply as a date reclaimed by separatist mobilisation, but as a temporally fragile construct from its inception. Anniversaries do not acquire meaning automatically; they are produced through political processes that invest dates with shared narratives, symbols and expectations (Butkowski 2022). Where such processes are incomplete or contested, anniversaries may remain unstable, vulnerable to reinterpretation or subject to strategic avoidance. October 1st exemplifies this condition. Its present volatility is inseparable from the circumstances of its birth in the early 1960s when decolonisation unfolded under international supervision and Cold War constraint prioritising administrative resolution over political consensus (International Crisis Group 2017b). The fragility of October 1st as a commemorative anchor thus predates both the post-federal state and contemporary separatism. It is rooted in a decolonisation process that foreclosed genuine choice, deferred questions of political identity and produced a temporal marker without closure. This section

examines how that fragility emerged, focusing first on British Southern Cameroons and the limits of internationally managed decolonisation.

Decolonisation without closure: Producing a fragile date

The origins of October 1st as a commemorative date are inseparable from the ambiguities of Cameroon's decolonisation. British Southern Cameroons' transition from trusteeship to union with the *Republic of Cameroun* was managed under international oversight, prioritising administrative resolution over popular sovereignty (Percival 2008). The 1961 plebiscite addressed political status but left questions of identity and autonomy unresolved (Fanso 2017). As a result, October 1st initially marked a procedural transition rather than a consensual national founding. This section examines how such incompleteness produced a fragile date, open to reinterpretation and contestation in later decades.

British Southern Cameroons and the limits of internationally managed decolonisation

British Southern Cameroons occupied an anomalous position within Africa's late-colonial order. Administered by Britain under a League of Nations mandate and later a United Nations trusteeship, the territory was governed not as a distinct colony but as an appendage of neighbouring Nigeria (Nfobin & Minang 2014). This arrangement, justified as administratively expedient, had far-reaching political consequences. It denied British Southern Cameroons a clear trajectory toward sovereign statehood and embedded its future within international frameworks that prioritised territorial consolidation over political self-determination (Ngege 2017). By the late 1950s, as decolonisation accelerated across Africa, the fate of British Southern Cameroons was increasingly shaped not by local aspirations alone, but by the strategic imperatives of the United Nations, Britain and regional actors navigating Cold War anxieties (Atabongwoung 2020).

Within this context, self-determination was tightly circumscribed. Rather than enabling a full spectrum of political options, the United Nations framed the future of British Southern Cameroons as a choice between integration with Nigeria or reunification with the already independent *Republic of Cameroun* (Ashukem 2022). Independence as a separate state was excluded from the ballot, despite sustained advocacy from segments of the local political elite. The rationale offered – that the territory was too small or economically unviable to stand alone – reflected a broader international tendency to equate stability with territorial aggregation (Nfobin & Minang 2014). Yet this logic reduced self-determination to a matter of administrative alignment rather than collective political will.

The 1961 plebiscite thus resolved a question of status without resolving a question of identity. Voters were asked to choose a future, but only within parameters set by external authorities (Percival 2008). The outcome in favour of reunification

with the *Republic of Cameroun* did not produce a shared national moment akin to independence celebrations elsewhere on the continent (Chiatoh 2019). Instead, it initiated a complex and asymmetric union whose terms were negotiated hastily and whose implications were imperfectly understood by the broader population. Thus, October 1st 1961, the date on which the union formally took effect, marked an administrative transition rather than a moment of sovereign birth (Kindong 2020).

This distinction is critical. Whereas independence days often function as temporal points of collective authorship, symbolising a people's emergence as political subjects, October 1st lacked this quality of consensual founding. It did not represent the achievement of independence, but the transfer of authority from one framework of external administration to another composite state (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). For Anglophone Cameroonians, the day signified neither the end of colonial subordination nor the unambiguous beginning of self-rule. Instead, it inaugurated a new political experiment whose contours were uncertain and whose durability depended on constitutional arrangements, most notably federalism that would later be dismantled (Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997).

As a result, October 1st entered Cameroon's political calendar already burdened with ambiguity. It was a date that required narrative work to stabilise its meaning, yet such work was unevenly undertaken and unevenly received. In the Francophone-dominated political centre, the union was framed as the completion of national reunification, retroactively incorporating British Southern Cameroons into a pre-existing nationalist story (Fonchingong 2013). However, describing this event as the completion of national sovereignty overlooks significant geopolitical exclusions. Most notably, the exclusion and integration of British Northern Cameroons into the Nigerian Federation was perceived as a profound loss by Yaoundé, prompting President Ahmadou Ahidjo to officially declare a day of national mourning (Mbah 2024). In subsequent years, various political actors also attempted to contest the permanent detachment and integration of Northern Cameroons, rendering the southern union only a partial realisation of a broader territorial ambition. In Anglophone regions, however, the date retained a more ambivalent resonance, tied to promises of autonomy, legal pluralism and political equality that would soon be contested (Nfobin 2017). The absence of a shared interpretive framework meant that October 1st never fully crystallised as a collectively owned anniversary.

This symbolic instability was compounded by the fact that the union's constitutional framework emerged through specific elite negotiations and representative channels rather than at a mass-deliberative popular moment. Although the union was preceded by a universal suffrage plebiscite and the participation of 25 Anglophone delegates led by John Ngu Foncha (including members of the Southern Cameroons House of Representatives and House of Chiefs) who negotiated its terms at the Fomuban Conference on behalf of their constituencies, the result-

ing federal constitution lacked the broad ritualised affirmation characteristic of foundational political settlements (Achankeng 2015; Chofor 2013; Nfobin 2017). Consequently, October 1st did not generate the deep affective attachment necessary for enduring commemorative investment. It remained a date acknowledged in official records but thinly embedded in popular political consciousness.

Crucially, the absence of a universally shared moment of independence did not render October 1st meaningless; rather, it left the date vulnerable to competing interpretations. Lacking closure, the date remained open to reinterpretation, re-signification and contestation. When federalism was abolished in 1972 and political power became increasingly centralised, the historical compromises associated with October 1st were neither publicly reaffirmed nor critically revisited (Nfobin 2017). Instead, they were allowed to recede into a muted past, unresolved and unritualised. This retreat did not extinguish memory; it suspended it. In this sense, October 1st exemplifies what might be termed a deferred anniversary, one whose political meaning is postponed rather than settled. Its original function as an administrative marker, rather than a sovereign founding, meant that it could not anchor a stable national narrative without sustained mnemonic labour (Begealawuh 2024). When such labour was withheld, the date did not disappear. It persisted as a latent temporal resource, capable of being reactivated under conditions of crisis.

The contemporary struggle over October 1st is therefore not an aberration imposed upon an otherwise settled past. It is the delayed eruption of contradictions embedded in the decolonisation process itself (Nfobin & Minang 2014). Internationally managed decolonisation resolved territorial status but left political identity incomplete. The plebiscite delivered a decision, but not closure. October 1st marked a beginning, but not a beginning owned equally by all. These unresolved tensions would later provide the symbolic raw material from which counter-narratives of betrayal, unfinished decolonisation and denied self-determination could be constructed (Achankeng 2018).

By tracing the origins of October 1st to the limits of internationally managed decolonisation, this section underscores a broader insight relevant to the politics of anniversaries: dates born of compromise, constraint or deferral may remain politically volatile long after their immediate context has faded. Where foundational moments are thinly legitimised and unevenly commemorated, anniversaries can become fault lines rather than anchors. In Cameroon, the fragility of October 1st was not a product of separatist invention, but a condition inherited from a decolonisation process that prioritised administrative resolution over collective authorship of the political future.

Avoided union: Mnemonic silencing and the rise of May 20th

The fragility of October 1st was compounded by state-led mnemonic practices after the 1972 referendum replaced federalism with a unitary republic (Fombad

2025). Whereas many postcolonial states institutionalise anniversaries to reinforce legitimacy, Cameroon pursued an alternative strategy: the selective avoidance of October 1st. In effect, the state progressively emptied the date of official recognition, neither commemorating the union with ceremonial ritual nor embedding it within civic consciousness (Nfobin & Minang 2021). This avoidance was neither neutral nor incidental; it was an intentional, strategic form of mnemonic governance, whereby the temporal politics of the state were used to suppress inconvenient or contested historical narratives (Vanguard Africa 2019). By choosing to displace, rather than celebrate, the Cameroonian government sought to manage national memory, foregrounding narratives of unity and centralisation while marginalising histories associated with Anglophone autonomy.

In place of October 1st, the state elevated May 20th, celebrated as Unitary State Day, as the symbolic anchor of the nation. This date marked the 1972 constitutional referendum that formally abolished the federal structure and consolidated authority in Yaoundé. Unlike October 1st, which remained ambiguous and contested, May 20th was readily amenable to state ritualisation: civic parades, flag displays, military ceremonies and school curricula all reinforced its position as the emblem of national cohesion (Nfobin & Minang 2021). Through the elevation of this substitute anniversary, the state enacted a temporal reorientation, shifting attention away from a date that might serve as a locus of Anglophone grievance to one that celebrated the consolidation of central power (Nfobin & Minang 2014). In doing so, the government transformed commemoration into an instrument of political integration, embedding the logic of unitary authority in public consciousness while erasing the constitutional compromises of 1961 from civic ritual.

Official state narratives actively construct this substitution through presidential speeches, educational curricula and civic media, which consistently frame the May 20th referendum as the definitive, unchallengeable birth of national unity. This narrative strategy relies on omission, designating October 1st as a historical aberration while saturating the public sphere with discourse that portrays unitary statehood as the sole guarantor of peace and stability. This calendrical substitution can be interpreted as a form of mnemonic governance through displacement. Whereas classical celebrations of national anniversaries aim to produce consensual memory and popular attachment, Cameroon's strategy relied on silencing a pre-existing commemorative moment and replacing it with a narrative conducive to state authority. By normalising May 20th and marginalising October 1st, the state sought to structure historical consciousness so that the past was experienced in alignment with centralised political objectives. Educational curricula, civic speeches and public holidays all participated in this project, repeatedly presenting the May 20th referendum as the definitive act of national unity while rendering October 1st politically awkward and historically muted (Nfobin 2019). In this way, avoidance became performative: silence and omission were themselves mechanisms of shaping collective memory.

The marginalisation of October 1st carried profound political and symbolic consequences. For Anglophone separatists, the displacement of the 1961 federal pact from official commemoration implied a denial of historical recognition (Nfobin & Minang 2014). The constitutional compromise that had granted Anglophone regions a measure of autonomy was effectively erased from the national mnemonic landscape, leaving the date of union unacknowledged in civic consciousness. Over time, this absence reinforced perceptions of systemic marginalisation, signalling that Anglophone experiences and political rights were peripheral to the dominant Francophone narrative of state-building (Nfobin 2019). By denying October 1st ceremonial or educational salience, the state inadvertently entrenched divisions it may have hoped to minimise, producing a latent reservoir of unacknowledged grievance that would later be mobilised by separatist actors (Nfobin & Minang 2021).

Importantly, avoidance did not equate to neutralisation. While October 1st was suppressed within official discourse, its memory persisted in private, local and Anglophone communal narratives. It became what could be termed a latent counter-memory, a temporal site of unresolved political tension capable of being reactivated under conditions of crisis (The Guardian 2025). In towns such as Buea and Bamenda, October 1st remained etched in the collective consciousness as a reminder of promised federal rights, legal pluralism and political equality – concepts that were systematically undermined by the abolition of federalism (Nogueira 2023). The state's refusal to commemorate the date publicly did not erase its meaning; it merely shifted the arena of contestation from official ritual to silenced memory, setting the stage for its later instrumentalisation as a symbol of resistance.

This dynamic highlights the productive power of avoidance in mnemonic politics. By failing to reconcile the historical ambiguities of 1961, the state rendered October 1st simultaneously invisible and potent. Its absence in public discourse created an opportunity for oppositional actors to claim the date for their own purposes, recasting it as a site of moral and political authority. When Anglophone separatists declared the independence of Ambazonia on October 1st 2017, they did not invent meaning *ex nihilo*; they capitalised on the symbolic vacancy left by decades of state avoidance and neglect (Fröhlich & Köpp 2019). The reactivation of October 1st as a counter-anniversary exemplifies how avoided dates can be more politically volatile than those firmly institutionalised, because the gap between official silence and lived memory produces a heightened potential for contestation.

Moreover, the Cameroonian case illustrates that mnemonic displacement operates across multiple dimensions: legal, educational, civic and symbolic. The state's suppression of October 1st was reinforced by constitutional centralisation, narratives emphasising national unity over regional autonomy, and curricular emphases on May 20th as the nation's defining moment (Nfobin 2019). In combina-

tion, these strategies constructed a temporal hierarchy in which certain dates were sanctioned, ritualised and celebrated, while others were excised or relegated to the margins of memory. Such hierarchical structuring of anniversaries demonstrates that power is not only exercised through coercion or policy, but also through the careful organisation of time itself.

In sum, the avoidance of October 1st and the concurrent elevation of May 20th illustrate the political work of silencing and displacement in the production of national memory. The strategy achieved short-term objectives: it allowed the state to celebrate a version of national unity consistent with centralisation, marginalising politically inconvenient narratives (Nfobin & Minang 2021). Yet it also sowed the seeds of future contestation. By leaving October 1st unresolved, the state created a latent counter-memory that could – and eventually would – be mobilised to challenge the official narrative, assert alternative histories and contest state authority (Nfobin & Minang 2014). This dynamic underscores the central argument of this article: anniversaries are not neutral markers of the past. They are instruments of power, whose significance is produced as much by omission and avoidance as by celebration and commemoration. October 1st in Cameroon demonstrates that suppressed anniversaries retain a persistent, latent force, capable of re-emerging as flashpoints of political contestation when the underlying historical contradictions remain unaddressed.

Counter-anniversaries and the securitisation of time

The re-emergence of October 1st as a politically charged date illustrates how avoided anniversaries can return as instruments of contestation. Ambazonian separatists have transformed the date into a counter-anniversary, challenging the state's monopoly over political time and historical narrative. In response, the Cameroonian government has tabooed commemoration, deploying coercive measures to control both memory and movement. This dual dynamic – reclamation by challengers and militarised suppression by the state – renders October 1st a site of intense temporal struggle. This section examines how anniversaries are simultaneously mobilised and policed, producing political effects that extend beyond ceremonial observance.

Ambazonia and the re-appropriation of October 1st

While the 2017 declaration of the independence of Ambazonia brought renewed global visibility to October 1st, it is historically inaccurate to view 2017 as the origin of its politicisation (Olomojobi 2023). Ever since the early 1990s, with the advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon, October 1st had already served as a rallying point for Anglophone movements. Early separatist mobilisations and commemorations of the date frequently provoked state crackdowns, resulting in prominent separatist figures such as Ayaba Cho Lucas, Melchisedek Kaavi and

Ebenazar Akwanga serving prison sentences during that decade in connection with October 1st activities (Nchinda 2015).

The declaration of Ambazonian independence was not merely symbolic; it constituted a counter-anniversary, directly challenging the state's control over political time and asserting an alternative narrative of sovereignty. Whereas the official calendar had rendered October 1st invisible, the declaration further transformed it into a moment of contested authority, demonstrating that suppressed anniversaries can return as instruments of political and mnemonic power (Nshom 2025a). The Ambazonian reappropriation illustrates how historical silences, left unresolved, create fertile terrain for insurgent claims to legitimacy (Loombe 2024).

Central to this reappropriation was a deliberate reframing of October 1st. No longer was the date a symbol of union or administrative transition; rather, it was recast as the commemoration of a betrayed or unfinished independence. Separatist rhetoric emphasised the perceived failure of the Cameroonian state to honour the promises embedded in the 1961 federal constitution, highlighting the erosion of autonomy, the marginalisation of Anglophone populations, and the suppression of distinct legal and political institutions (Shulika & Tella 2022). In this reframing, October 1st became a moral and historical claim: a temporal marker asserting that the Anglophone quest for self-determination remained unresolved. By inverting the official narrative, Ambazonian actors converted a suppressed anniversary into a site of moral legitimacy and historical rectitude.

The reclamation of October 1st was also materially and symbolically enacted through flags, ceremonies and diasporic activism (Shaw 2018). Across Anglophone regions, separatist banners, most notably the blue-and-white Ambazonian flag, were displayed in public spaces, asserting visual authority over urban landscapes traditionally dominated by the Cameroonian national flag (Essa 2017). Ceremonies, ranging from small-scale community gatherings to public demonstrations, ritualised the date as a foundational moment for the imagined state of Ambazonia. Online mobilisation played a complementary role: social media platforms amplified commemorations, circulated narratives of betrayal and resistance, and connected diasporic populations to local struggles, effectively transforming the anniversary into a transnational mnemonic project (Eyango 2018). Through these tools, the date was not only symbolically reclaimed but actively reproduced as a contested site of memory and identity, demonstrating the interplay between local, national and global dimensions of counter-memory.

This process of mnemonic reconstruction must be understood within broader debates on self-determination, symbolic sovereignty and the internationalisation of domestic conflict. By asserting control over October 1st, separatist actors enacted a form of temporal sovereignty, claiming the right to define political legitimacy in defiance of the state (MMI 2025). The date became a medium through which moral and political authority could be exercised, signalling to domestic and international

audiences alike that Anglophone grievances were not merely historical but on-going and unresolved (Orock 2021). Diasporic advocacy and media engagement further extended this claim beyond Cameroon's borders, situating October 1st as a focal point in campaigns for international recognition, humanitarian support and normative legitimacy. In doing so, the counter-anniversary illustrates how disputes over commemorative time are not confined to domestic politics but are intimately linked to the internationalisation of local struggles.

The struggle over October 1st operates across multiple temporal and spatial scales. Domestically, it shapes civic life in Anglophone cities, where local populations navigate lockdowns, security enforcement and symbolic displays of resistance (International Committee of the Red Cross 2025). Diasporically, the anniversary functions as a connective tissue, linking communities across Europe, North America and Africa to a shared historical grievance and political vision (Nshom 2025b). Internationally, it frames debates over self-determination, minority rights and humanitarian intervention, drawing attention to the Anglophone crisis as more than an internal administrative matter (Ketzmerick 2023). In each arena, the date serves as a lever for legitimacy, a site where moral, symbolic and political claims converge. Control over October 1st is thus not merely ceremonial; it is constitutive of the broader struggle over political authority, historical memory and territorial sovereignty.

Importantly, the Ambazonian reappropriation demonstrates that suppressed anniversaries retain an enduring latent power. Whereas the Cameroonian state had hoped to neutralise October 1st through avoidance and substitution with May 20th, the counter-anniversary reveals the limits of such strategies. By withholding ritual, recognition or narrative reinforcement, the state inadvertently created a temporal vacuum that could be occupied by dissenting actors. In this sense, October 1st exemplifies what memory scholars describe as the productive potential of absence and suppression: a date avoided by the state can, paradoxically, emerge as a focal point of resistance precisely because it has been neglected, unresolved and politically charged.

In sum, the 2017 declaration of Ambazonia independence illustrates how counter-anniversaries operate as instruments of political and mnemonic power, challenging official narratives, asserting alternative claims to sovereignty, and connecting local struggles to broader international debates (Akua 2025). By reclaiming October 1st, separatist actors transformed a date of silence into a contested arena of legitimacy, demonstrating that anniversaries are not merely ceremonial markers but active sites of political struggle (Vinson & Zeleza 2025). The Ambazonian case highlights the ways in which avoided anniversaries, once reactivated, can shape domestic governance, diasporic identity and international advocacy, underscoring the profound implications of temporal politics in conflict settings.

Securitising memory: Lockdowns, coercion and the criminalisation of commemoration

Since the declaration of Ambazonian independence in 2017, October 1st has not merely been a contested date; it has become one of the most militarised anniversaries in Cameroon's political calendar (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2025). It is, however, worth noting that October 1st had already become a heavily militarised anniversary well before the 2017 crisis. Early actions by groups like the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), including localised uprisings and anniversary protests in the North West Region during the 1990s, demonstrated that the state's security apparatus had long treated the date as a subversive threat (Nchinda 2015). While the contemporary crisis has exponentially intensified this trend, the securitisation of October 1st is rooted in decades of prior state crackdowns against commemorative defiance.

This securitisation of time is multidimensional: it involves the deployment of armed forces, legal restrictions, public silences and symbolic coercion, and it reveals how anniversaries in conflict zones operate as instruments of political authority rather than neutral markers of history (Beseng, Crawford & Annan 2023). The Cameroonian case demonstrates that absence, silence and enforced immobility are not signs of apathy, but deliberate effects of contested memory, designed to shape political behaviour and define allegiances.

Cameroon has systematically militarised October 1st to prevent any public assertion of Ambazonian sovereignty. Security forces are deployed in Anglophone towns, saturating streets, monitoring public spaces and conducting checkpoints that restrict movement. Communication blackouts, particularly the temporary suspension of internet and social media services, aim to prevent the dissemination of separatist narratives and mobilisation calls (Al Jazeera 2017). Public gatherings are frequently banned, while arrests and detentions target activists, journalists and ordinary citizens suspected of commemorating October 1st.

Notable among these interventions is the case of the 'Nera 10', ten Ambazonian separatist leaders arrested in Nigeria and extradited to Cameroon (Amnesty International 2018). While their arrests frequently coincide with heightened tensions around October 1st anniversaries, framing them as being detained merely for commemorative observance is factually incorrect. They faced severe charges related to acts of terrorism, incitement to violence and the killing of civilians. Similar serious criminal charges explain why diaspora activists such as Cho Ayaba and Melchisedek Kaavi have faced legal proceedings in Norway and Belgium, respectively (Human Rights Watch 2026; Ndi 2026). Consequently, these high-profile legal cases extend far beyond the immediate context of commemorative activities, highlighting how state prosecution targets structural leadership under the broader umbrella of counter-terrorism and public security.

As previously mentioned, the arrest of Julius Ayuk Tabe and other Ambazonian leaders (Nera 10) in Nigeria, and their subsequent trial and imprisonment in Cameroon, have amplified the stakes of the anniversary (BBC 2018). These leaders, who serve as symbolic anchors of the independence movement, are central to Ambazonian mnemonic strategies (Human Rights Watch 2019). Their incarceration underscores the risks associated with asserting alternative claims to historical and political legitimacy, while simultaneously galvanising the diaspora and local populations around October 1st as a sacred temporal site of resistance. In effect, the state's punitive actions against leadership and grassroots actors alike highlight the intimate connection between anniversary observance, political authority and the enforcement of national unity through coercion.

Separatist actors exercise symbolic coercion to enforce participation in commemorations. The establishment of ghost towns, in which streets are emptied and businesses shuttered under threat of arson or intimidation, transforms civic space into a controlled arena of mnemonic performance (Africanews 2025). Flags, posters and street demonstrations serve as both markers of territorial claim and mechanisms of social discipline, ensuring that participation, or at least visible compliance, is observable (DW 2023). In combination with the state's coercive measures, these practices create a highly securitised environment in which the anniversary itself is inseparable from surveillance, enforcement and risk.

The political effects of these securitising practices are profound. By regulating anniversaries through coercion rather than consensus, memory becomes entangled with trauma (Heath-Kelly & Shanaah 2025). Citizens are forced to navigate fear, symbolic obligation and political loyalty simultaneously. Silence, absence and immobility, whether imposed by the state or enforced by separatist mandates, function as visible indicators of contested authority, producing an environment in which commemoration is experienced as an act of risk rather than celebration (Verovšek 2016). In this context, October 1st illustrates how the governance of memory through coercion transforms what might otherwise be a moment of collective reflection into a flashpoint of anxiety and political tension.

The securitisation of October 1st also demonstrates the feedback loops inherent in contested commemorations. State interventions, such as the arrests of the 'NERA 10', while intended to neutralise dissent, reinforce the symbolic potency of the anniversary. Each act of repression underscores the unresolved nature of the 1961 union and validates separatist claims of marginalisation and historical betrayal. Conversely, the enforcement of ghost towns and symbolic rituals by separatists provokes further state intervention, creating an ongoing cycle of coercion, counter-memory and resistance. The anniversary thus becomes both a cause and a consequence of conflict, illustrating how temporal politics and memory are deeply entangled with security practices.

Ultimately, the Cameroonian case illustrates a paradox central to the politics of avoided anniversaries: the suppression of memory through coercion preserves and amplifies its potency. October 1st remains a flashpoint because it is feared, contested and politically charged. By governing anniversaries through force, the state and separatist actors convert memory into both a tool of domination and a source of enduring resistance, transforming commemoration into an arena where historical grievance, political authority and social control intersect.

Conclusion

October 1st in Cameroon illustrates that anniversaries are far more than symbolic markers of history; they function as temporal fault lines, where unresolved pasts repeatedly destabilise the present. From its ambiguous origins in the 1961 union, through its suppression in favour of May 20th, to its reclamation by Ambazonian separatists, the date has continuously generated contestation, coercion and political mobilisation. The securitisation of commemoration manifested in militarised lockdowns, arrests of the NERA 10, and their subsequent imprisonment sanctioned by the Yaoundé Military court demonstrates that memory is inseparable from authority and control. At the same time, the counter-anniversary practices of separatists reveal that suppressed histories are not neutralised by avoidance; they endure as latent claims, capable of reactivation, resistance and symbolic sovereignty. In this regard, anniversaries emerge not merely as instruments of commemoration but as potent conflict multipliers, shaping domestic, diasporic and international arenas of political contestation.

The broader implications for international relations and postcolonial governance are significant. Cameroon's Anglophone crisis underscores that institutional or security-focused reforms alone cannot resolve conflicts rooted in contested memory. Durable peace requires engagement with competing historical imaginaries through inclusive mnemonic dialogue and historical reckoning, rather than enforced forgetting or temporal erasure. Avoided or contested anniversaries reveal that the past persists in shaping political loyalties, collective identities and security dynamics. Recognising anniversaries as active sites of memory and power highlights the necessity of addressing temporal politics alongside conventional political, legal and security measures, demonstrating that reconciliation depends as much on shared narratives of the past as on the architecture of the present.



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