Research Article

Nationhood Deferred: Dignity, Consent, and the Normative Crisis of Ambazonian Nationalism at Home and in the Diaspora

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Abstract

The Ambazonian struggle for self-determination, rooted in the contested postcolonial union between the former British Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon, has generated not only a protracted armed conflict but a shared crisis of nationalist identity that spans the conflict zone and the global diaspora. As prospects for decisive military victory have receded, the movement has entered a condition of deferred nationhood, characterized by identity dislocation, legitimacy fragmentation, and nationalist fatigue. While early mass mobilization demonstrated deep popular belief and performative decolonization, this momentum was undermined by elite institutional hedging and by moral erosion associated with atrocities and predatory practices committed by state and non-state actors. This article argues that the core crisis is normative rather than merely strategic or military. Drawing on a critical liberative framework and the analytic foundations of Forced Unity (Asongu, 2025), the study advances a qualitative normative analysis of legitimacy breakdown, civic agency loss, and the home–diaspora dialectic of suspended belonging. It contends that sustainable peace—whether through independence or a reconstituted constitutional order—is unattainable without a process capable of restoring political dignity and genuine consent. The article concludes by repositioning the Alliance for Peace and Justice (APJ) Peace Plan as a restorative justice mechanism designed to repair the broken social contract through internationally guaranteed, participatory procedures.

Keywords: Ambazonia, Deferred Nationhood, Dignity, Consent, Nationalism, Diaspora, Peacebuilding

1. Introduction

Nationalist movements are sustained not only by strategic calculations or material grievances but by a deeper promise of existential resolution—the transformation from a condition of perceived subjugation to one of recognized political agency. For Ambazonian nationalists, the struggle for self-determination has never been solely about territorial sovereignty, administrative decentralization, or economic redistribution. At its core, it is a quest to restore political dignity, secure historical recognition, and reclaim collective authorship over a future long experienced as imposed and externally managed.

The armed conflict that escalated dramatically following the violent repression of Anglophone civil society protests in 2016 remains unresolved. Yet its trajectory has shifted in ways that profoundly reshape the nationalist project itself. What began as a period of revolutionary effervescence and mass defiance has hardened into a grinding stalemate characterized by militarization, fragmentation, and exhaustion. This shift from mobilization to entrenchment has altered how Ambazonian nationalism is experienced, articulated, and increasingly doubted—both within Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest Regions and across a vast, digitally connected diaspora stretching from Africa to Europe and North America.

Much of the scholarly literature on the Anglophone problem and its radicalization into the Ambazonian independence movement has emphasized linguistic marginalization, institutional assimilation, and diaspora-driven mobilization [1-3]. While these accounts are indispensable, they often under-theorize the deeper normative collapse at the heart of the conflict. They explain *how* grievances

accumulate but insufficiently interrogate *why* legitimacy erodes so thoroughly that even exhaustion fails to produce settlement.

This article advances the argument that the contemporary impasse is best understood as a **normative crisis**—specifically, a prolonged rupture of political dignity and consent. That rupture has generated a distinctive political pathology termed *deferred nationhood*: a condition in which a people possess a coherent national consciousness and mobilized identity without access to an institutional structure capable of affirming it. Deferred nationhood is neither classic statelessness nor simply unrealized sovereignty; it is a liminal condition of suspended belonging that produces intense mobilization early on but becomes psychologically corrosive when extended indefinitely.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, it situates the Ambazonian crisis within broader debates on postcolonial constitutionalism, secession legitimacy, and diaspora nationalism. Second, it introduces a conceptual framework centered on deferred nationhood, elite hedging, and nationalist fatigue. Third, it analyzes how these dynamics unfolded historically—from constitutional rupture to revolutionary zenith, elite fracture, and moral erosion. Finally, it evaluates the Alliance for Peace and Justice (APJ) Peace Plan as a restorative justice mechanism oriented toward dignity, consent, and agency restoration, rather than outcome imposition.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Anglophone Marginalization and Postcolonial Constitutionalism
Foundational scholarship on Cameroon's Anglophone problem documents how postcolonial state-building entrenched perceptions of marginalization through centralization, linguistic dominance, and institutional assimilation [3,4]. These studies demonstrate that grievances were not episodic but structural, rooted in the dismantling of federal arrangements that once symbolized negotiated coexistence. Further emphasizes that federalism in the Cameroonian context was not merely administrative but existential—serving as a vehicle for recognition, legal pluralism, and historical continuity [2].

Postcolonial constitutionalism is particularly relevant because many African states inherited constitutional forms whose legitimacy was weakly internalized and unevenly negotiated. Federal and quasi-federal arrangements often functioned as symbolic guarantees for minority political communities rather than purely technical governance solutions. When such arrangements are unilaterally altered, the effects are not only institutional but moral: they generate a perception that political belonging has been transformed from a consensual association into an imposed condition.

Analysis of the 1961 union and the 1972 abolition of federalism situates the Ambazonian case within this broader postcolonial pattern [5]. The constitutional rupture is interpreted not simply as a policy change but as a revocation of the foundational consent upon which the union was legitimated. This perspective moves beyond grievance enumeration toward a legitimacy diagnosis.

2.2. Diaspora Politics and Long-Distance Nationalism
Diaspora politics occupies an increasingly central place in analyses of the Ambazonian conflict. Highlights the ways in which diaspora actors can amplify nationalist demands, sometimes adopting maximalist positions insulated from the everyday risks faced by populations in the conflict zone [1]. This insight complicates simplistic narratives that portray the movement as either purely internal or externally orchestrated.

Diaspora theory suggests that diasporas are not passive extensions of homeland politics but political actors embedded in distinct legal regimes, media ecologies, and economies of recognition. Long-distance nationalism can sustain mobilization, resources, and visibility, but it can also harden positions, incentivize rhetorical radicalism, and deepen internal fragmentation when accountability mechanisms are weak. Importantly, diaspora engagement often occurs within bureaucratic systems—immigration, asylum, humanitarian classification—that impose state-centered categories misaligned with emergent nationalist identities. This creates a distinctive form of identity dislocation that is administrative as much as psychological.

The Ambazonian diaspora illustrates these dynamics vividly. While diaspora activism has been indispensable for fundraising, advocacy, and humanitarian relief, it has also contributed to narrative polarization and leadership competition. The persistence of deferred nationhood intensifies these tensions, as diasporic identity maintenance becomes an ongoing labor of explanation without closure.

2.3. Secession Legitimacy and Normative Political Theory
Normative political theory provides essential tools for clarifying why the Ambazonian conflict persists despite military stalemate. Remedial-right approach to secession argues that political divorce may be morally justified under conditions of sustained rights violations, unjust annexation, or the systematic blockage of internal remedies [6]. This framework is directly relevant to Ambazonia, where constitutional grievances and violent repression have undermined confidence in internal reform.

However, remedial-right theories are incomplete if they focus exclusively on exit justification without addressing successor legitimacy. Caution that liberation movements risk reproducing domination when coercion becomes their internal logic or when armed struggle is detached from civic accountability [7,8]. This insight helps explain why nationalist legitimacy can erode even when grievances remain valid.

From this perspective, *consent* emerges as a critical analytic bridge. Consent is not exhausted by historical plebiscites or electoral rituals; it requires ongoing affirmation through procedures that recognize agency and allow for revision. Where consent is denied or rendered meaningless, political association becomes coercive rather than covenantal.

2.4. Peacebuilding, Post-Liberal Critiques, and Normative Reconstruction

Peacebuilding scholarship further cautions against conflating conflict management with legitimacy repair. Critique of post-liberal peace highlights how externally imposed settlements may stabilize violence while leaving underlying grievances intact [9]. In contexts of deep constitutional rupture, administrative concessions—such as decentralization packages or "special status" arrangements—risk functioning as containment rather than resolution if they bypass genuine participation.

This literature underscores the need for *normative reconstruction*: processes that restore dignity, rebuild trust, and reconstitute agency before fixing political outcomes. It is within this theoretical space that the APJ Peace Plan is evaluated in this article—not as a partisan demand, but as a process-oriented framework addressing the legitimacy deficit at the heart of the conflict.

3. Conceptual Framework

This article advances a conceptual framework centered on three interrelated constructs: **deferred nationhood, elite hedging**, and **nationalist fatigue**. Together, these concepts illuminate how legitimacy erosion, identity dislocation, and political exhaustion emerge and interact across homeland and diaspora contexts.

3.1. Deferred Nationhood

Deferred nationhood refers to a condition in which a people possess a coherent national consciousness and collective political identity without access to an internationally recognized or institutionally consolidated nation-state capable of affirming that identity. Unlike statelessness, which denotes the absence of legal citizenship, deferred nationhood describes the possession of a contested national identity whose realization is continuously postponed by repression, conflict, or stalled political processes.

In Ambazonia, deferred nationhood manifests as a persistent gap between self-identification and institutional recognition. Cameroonian citizenship is increasingly experienced as misrecognition, yet no recognized alternative exists to encode Ambazonian identity in passports, international databases, or constitutional orders. This produces a state of suspended belonging that shapes everyday practices, from education to asylum claims.

3.2. Elite Hedging

Elite hedging refers to the strategic behavior of institutional, political, religious, or professional elites who rhetorically endorse nationalist grievances while materially preserving their positions within the existing state structure. Hedging is often rational under uncertainty but cumulatively corrosive. It creates asymmetries of risk between leaders and masses and signals that the struggle is existential for some but negotiable for others.

In the Ambazonian case, elite hedging was most visible during the revolutionary zenith of 2016–2017, when grassroots calls for institutional withdrawal were not matched by corresponding elite action. This legitimacy gap weakened trust, fragmented authority, and laid the groundwork for later cynicism.

3.3. Nationalist Fatigue

Nationalist fatigue denotes a condition of cumulative political and emotional exhaustion arising when sustained mobilization fails to produce institutional recognition, ethical coherence, or credible progress. It is not the abandonment of belief but the erosion of sustainability. In both homeland and diaspora contexts, nationalist fatigue manifests as disengagement, cynicism, and retreat into private survival strategies.

3.4. Relational Dynamics

Deferred nationhood generates prolonged liminality; elite hedging interrupts the translation of mobilization into institutional coherence; nationalist fatigue emerges as the cumulative outcome. Together, these dynamics explain why protracted conflict persists despite exhaustion and why solutions that bypass agency-restoring processes repeatedly fail.

4. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative normative methodology** grounded in critical political theory, decolonial analysis, and conflict studies. Rather than attempting causal prediction or quantitative measurement, the research is oriented toward diagnosing the *legitimacy architecture* of the Ambazonian crisis: how political authority lost moral credibility, how collective agency was displaced, and why prolonged conflict has failed to yield settlement despite widespread exhaustion.

The methodological approach integrates four sources of analysis. First, it draws on **historical-constitutional documentation**, including the 1961 United Nations–supervised plebiscite and the 1972 constitutional restructuring, to examine the foundations of consent and their subsequent rupture. Second, it engages **secondary scholarly literature** on Anglophone marginalization, diaspora nationalism, secession legitimacy, and postcolonial constitutionalism. Third, it incorporates **human rights documentation** produced by international organizations to assess the ethical consequences of protracted violence for civic legitimacy. Fourth, it draws conceptually from *Forced Unity*, particularly its articulation of consent, dignity, and agency as normative pillars of political order [5].

The analysis proceeds interpretively through thematic synthesis. Rather than treating nationalism as a homogeneous or static phenomenon, the study traces how nationalist meaning evolves across phases of mobilization, elite response, militarization, and exhaustion. This approach is particularly suited to conflicts in which the central explanatory variables—dignity, consent, legitimacy, and identity—are normative rather than material. The goal is not to adjudicate competing territorial claims, but to clarify why existing political arrangements fail to command moral allegiance and why proposed solutions often lack durability.

Finally, the methodology adopts a **reflexive stance**. As a scholar with lived proximity to the Ambazonian context, the

author acknowledges the risk of normative over-identification. This is mitigated through sustained engagement with critical theory, attention to internal contradictions within the nationalist movement, and explicit critique of abuses committed by all parties. Reflexivity here is not a claim to neutrality, but a commitment to analytic integrity.

4.1. Historical and Structural Origins: The Foundations of Grievance and the Rupture of Consent

The Ambazonian crisis cannot be adequately understood without reference to its historical-constitutional foundations. The political union formed in 1961 between the former British Southern Cameroons and the already independent Republic of Cameroon was not conceived, at least by many Southern Cameroonians, as an act of annexation. Rather, it was presented and understood as a *federal compact* between two distinct political communities emerging from different colonial traditions.

The United Nations–supervised plebiscite of February 1961 offered Southern Cameroonians a constrained choice: achieve independence by joining Nigeria or achieve independence by joining the Republic of Cameroon [10]. Independence as a standalone state was not presented as an option. Crucially, the decision to join Cameroon was framed around explicit assurances that a federal structure would preserve Anglophone legal (Common Law), educational, and administrative institutions. Federalism thus functioned as the moral condition for consent. It was not merely a governance arrangement but a symbolic guarantee of recognition and equality.

The unilateral abolition of federalism in 1972 by President Ahmadou Ahidjo constituted a decisive rupture of this foundational understanding. By transforming the Federal Republic of Cameroon into a highly centralized unitary state, the government effectively redefined the nature of the political association without renewed consent. From a normative perspective, this act was not simply constitutional engineering; it was a revocation of the original compact. It marked the transition from a negotiated union to an imposed order.

Over subsequent decades, centralization was accompanied by policies that Anglophones increasingly experienced as assimilative. The gradual erosion of the Common Law system through the appointment of Francophone-trained magistrates, the destabilization of the Anglophone educational subsystem, and the disproportionate allocation of infrastructure and political appointments reinforced perceptions of [3,11]. Importantly, these developments were not interpreted merely as poor governance but as symbolic erasure—signals that Anglophone identity and institutional preferences were incompatible with the dominant vision of the state.

For decades, Anglophone actors pursued redress through constitutional and political channels: opposition party formation, litigation in domestic and international forums, professional association advocacy, and intellectual critique. The persistent failure of these efforts—often met with elite co-optation, intimidation, or administrative dismissal—contributed to a growing belief that meaningful reform within the existing state structure was structurally foreclosed. By the mid-2010s, constitutional engagement had come to be seen by many as performative rather than transformative.

The lawyers' and teachers' protests of 2016 crystallized these accumulated grievances. Initially framed as professional demands for the protection of Common Law courts and Anglophone education, the protests quickly acquired broader political significance. The state's violent response—arrests, beatings, and the killing of protesters—represented a critical legitimacy rupture. For many Anglophones, it confirmed that even modest institutional grievances would be met with force rather than dialogue. This moment delegitimized constitutional engagement for a generation and accelerated the shift from civil dissent to armed resistance.

Crucially, this radicalization was not an external ideological imposition driven primarily by the diaspora. It was endogenous, grounded in decades of lived experience and catalyzed by state violence. The turn to armed struggle thus emerged not as fringe extremism but as a tragic response to the prolonged denial of dignity and consent.

4.2. The Revolutionary Zenith and the Fracture of Nationalist Legitimacy

4.2.1. Popular Nationalism and Performative Decolonization

The period between late 2016 and 2017 marked the zenith of popular Ambazonian nationalism. This phase was characterized by widespread, bottom-up mobilization that extended far beyond elite political circles. National identity was not merely asserted discursively; it was enacted through everyday practices. Ambazonian flags were displayed publicly, national anthems were sung in defiance of state authority, and "ghost town" strikes paralyzed economic activity as a form of collective refusal.

These acts constituted a form of *performative decolonization*. By withdrawing symbolic and material participation from Cameroonian civic rituals, participants sought to enact sovereignty before it was formally recognized. The circulation of Ambazonian identity cards and the rejection of Cameroonian national symbols reflected a profound rupture in political allegiance. National consciousness was no longer latent; it was explicit, embodied, and collectively affirmed.

At this stage, the nationalist project possessed substantial moral capital. The scale and spontaneity of participation suggested that Ambazonian identity had achieved a depth of social penetration rarely seen in secessionist movements. Importantly, this mobilization was not limited to activists; it permeated churches, schools, markets, and households. The nationalist claim was experienced as existential rather than ideological.

4.2.2. Elite Institutional Hedging and the Emergence of a Legitimacy Gap

Yet the revolutionary moment also exposed a critical vulnerability: the disjunction between popular mobilization and elite institutional alignment. Grassroots actors demanded not only symbolic affirmation but concrete institutional withdrawal from the Cameroonian state. Parliamentarians representing Anglophone constituencies were urged to resign from the National Assembly. Major religious institutions—particularly the Catholic Church in the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province, the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, and the Cameroon Baptist Convention—were called upon to sever national institutional ties as a moral statement.

These demands largely went unmet. With few exceptions, parliamentarians retained their seats. Religious institutions criticized state violence and engaged in mediation, but declined to withdraw from national structures. This reluctance was rarely rooted in ideological opposition to the nationalist cause. Rather, it reflected a calculus of risk and responsibility. Institutional elites faced the prospect of losing salaries, legal recognition, institutional stability, and international legitimacy in exchange for an uncertain political future.

This strategic restraint—conceptualized here as *elite hedging*—had profound consequences. While the masses bore the costs of ghost towns, military reprisals, and economic collapse, elites appeared insulated from equivalent sacrifice. Over time, this asymmetry produced a legitimacy gap. The struggle was experienced as existential for some and negotiable for others.

From a normative perspective, this gap undermined collective trust. Nationalist movements derive legitimacy not only from grievance but from perceived solidarity across social strata. When leaders hedge, they inadvertently signal that the future they proclaim is not one they are fully prepared to inhabit. This perception eroded confidence in leadership credibility and weakened the movement's capacity for coordinated strategy.

4.2.3. From Moral Unity to Fragmentation

As elite hedging persisted, the nationalist project began to fragment. Competing leadership claims emerged, particularly within the diaspora, where institutional accountability was weakest. Armed groups proliferated with limited coordination or oversight. The initial moral clarity of resistance against state repression gave way to strategic confusion and internal contestation.

This fragmentation did not immediately extinguish nationalist belief. However, it altered its character. What had once been a shared project of collective emancipation increasingly resembled a contested field of authority claims, fundraising appeals, and rhetorical escalation. The seeds of nationalist fatigue were sown at this stage—not through defeat, but through the erosion of moral coherence.

4.3. The Descent into Protracted Conflict and Moral Erosion
4.3.1. State Violence and the Reinforcement of Separatist Narratives

As the conflict escalated beyond its initial phase of mass protest and symbolic resistance, the Cameroonian state responded with an increasingly militarized counterinsurgency strategy. International human rights organizations have documented patterns of abuse including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, village burnings, and the large-scale displacement of civilian populations [12,13]. These actions were often justified by the state as necessary measures to combat terrorism and restore order.

From a normative perspective, however, such practices further eroded the state's already fragile legitimacy in Anglophone regions. Rather than isolating separatist actors, state violence reinforced the perception that the Cameroonian state was fundamentally incapable of recognizing Anglophone dignity or engaging dissent through dialogue. The securitization of political grievance transformed the conflict from a constitutional dispute into an existential confrontation, lending credibility to separatist claims that reform within the existing system was illusory.

This pattern is consistent with broader conflict literature demonstrating that indiscriminate repression tends to radicalize populations rather than pacify them. In the Ambazonian context, counterinsurgency tactics did not merely fail to restore loyalty; they hardened identity boundaries and normalized the perception of the state as an occupying force rather than a legitimate authority.

4.3.2. Separatist Violence and the Collapse of Moral Asymmetry

Yet a critical liberative analysis cannot remain silent about violence committed by non-state actors. As the conflict entered a protracted phase, armed separatist groups increasingly engaged in practices that violated the ethical foundations of liberation. These included kidnappings for ransom, targeted killings of civilians accused of collaboration, violent enforcement of "ghost town" lockdowns, and systematic attacks on schools that defied boycott orders [13].

These actions represented a decisive shift from defensive resistance to predatory governance. The original moral asymmetry—oppressed civilians versus a repressive state—collapsed as armed groups began to exercise coercive authority over the very populations they claimed to liberate. Insight that the oppressed can internalize and reproduce the logic of oppression, this transition marked a profound ethical rupture within the nationalist movement [8].

For ordinary civilians, the lived experience of the conflict increasingly resembled a condition of double subjugation. Communities found themselves trapped between a militarized state and armed groups enforcing compliance through fear. Support for the idea of independence did not disappear, but it became conditional, ambivalent, and often privately held rather than publicly expressed. Liberation rhetoric no longer mapped cleanly onto everyday survival.

4.3.3. Moral Erosion and the Crisis of Civic Authority

The cumulative effect of violence by all parties was the erosion of civic authority. Moral authority—the capacity to command voluntary allegiance through legitimacy rather than coercion—is central to nationalist movements. When violence becomes untethered from a shared civic mandate, authority fragments into localized, militarized power.

In Ambazonia, this erosion manifested in the proliferation of armed factions claiming representation without accountability. Diaspora-based leadership structures often lacked effective control over fighters on the ground, while local commanders increasingly operated autonomously. This disconnect further undermined trust, as civilians could no longer discern who spoke legitimately on behalf of the nationalist cause.

Moral erosion thus functioned as an accelerant of nationalist fatigue. The longer the conflict persisted without ethical coherence or institutional consolidation, the more the population retreated into strategies of quiet survival. What remained was not a defeated nationalism, but a wounded one—still emotionally resonant, yet increasingly hollowed out.

4.4. Deferred Nationhood as Lived Experience: Homeland and Diaspora
4.4.1. Suspended Belonging in the Conflict Zone

Within the Northwest and Southwest Regions, deferred nationhood is not an abstract concept but a lived condition shaping daily life. Millions of Ambazonians inhabit a political reality in which Cameroonian citizenship no longer signifies belonging, yet no alternative state exists to replace it. This produces a pervasive sense of suspended belonging—a condition in which identity is socially affirmed but institutionally denied.

This dislocation is especially visible in education. Children are taught national histories that many families reject as illegitimate, while schooling itself is disrupted by violence and boycotts. The resulting cognitive dissonance—learning a civic narrative that contradicts lived political reality—has long-term implications for social trust and generational identity formation.

Economic life is similarly affected. Markets operate intermittently, farming is constrained by insecurity, and mobility is governed by rumor and risk calculation. Citizenship, in its practical sense as access to protection and opportunity, is hollowed out. What remains is a formal legal status divorced from its substantive meaning.

4.4.2. Diasporic Bureaucratic Dislocation

In the diaspora, deferred nationhood assumes a more bureaucratic form. Ambazonians who flee violence and seek refuge abroad are categorized within international systems as Cameroonian nationals. Asylum claims, humanitarian assistance, and legal documentation are processed under a state identity that many have intellectually and emotionally repudiated.

This administrative misrecognition produces a distinct form of identity strain. Even among those who acquire citizenship in host countries, their origin remains officially tethered to Cameroon. Children born abroad inherit this classification, reproducing the asymmetry between self-identification and institutional recognition across generations.

Diaspora engagement thus becomes a continuous labor of explanation—clarifying to outsiders a conflict that lacks international resolution, advocating for a cause that appears frozen, and sustaining emotional investment in a homeland whose political future remains opaque. Over time, this labor contributes to nationalist fatigue, particularly as the moral clarity of the struggle is complicated by reports of internal abuses and leadership fragmentation.

4.4.3. Nationalist Fatigue as Transnational Phenomenon

Nationalist fatigue emerges not as sudden disillusionment but as cumulative exhaustion. In the homeland, fatigue is shaped by fear, poverty, and the erosion of everyday normalcy. In the diaspora, it is shaped by narrative saturation, donor fatigue, and the psychological toll of prolonged liminality.

Importantly, nationalist fatigue does not necessarily result in ideological rejection. Many continue to believe in the justice of the Ambazonian cause while withdrawing from active participation. This silent disengagement is analytically significant because it weakens collective agency without producing overt opposition. Movements can thus appear rhetorically radical while being substantively depleted.

5. Discussion
5.1. Why Stalemate Persists Despite Exhaustion

The persistence of the Ambazonian conflict despite widespread exhaustion presents a theoretical puzzle. Conventional conflict models predict that war fatigue should incentivize compromise or capitulation. Yet in Ambazonia, neither has occurred. This article argues that the answer lies in the interaction of deferred nationhood, elite hedging, and moral erosion.

Deferred nationhood sustains grievance by denying closure. Without a recognized mechanism to resolve identity claims, exhaustion does not translate into acceptance; it translates into paralysis. Elite hedging interrupts the conversion of popular will into institutional strategy, preventing coherent negotiation or settlement. Moral erosion undermines the credibility of armed struggle without restoring confidence in the state. The result is a stalemate in which all options appear illegitimate.

This dynamic explains why externally imposed solutions—military pacification, cosmetic decentralization, or elite bargaining—fail to produce durable peace. They address symptoms without repairing the normative foundations of political order. Legitimacy cannot be coerced, outsourced, or indefinitely deferred.

From a normative perspective, the crisis is not that Ambazonians demand too much, but that they have been denied the procedural means to demand anything legitimately. Until dignity and consent are restored through a credible, agency-centered process, exhaustion will continue to coexist with resistance, and fatigue will deepen rather than resolve the conflict.

5.2. The APJ Peace Plan as a Restorative Justice Mechanism

The Alliance for Peace and Justice (APJ) Peace Plan represents a qualitative departure from prior initiatives aimed at resolving the Ambazonian crisis. Rather than proposing a predetermined political outcome, the APJ framework is best understood as a **restorative justice mechanism** designed to repair the normative foundations of political order: dignity, consent, and agency. Its central insight is that peace cannot be imposed where legitimacy has collapsed; it must be reconstructed through a process that restores political authorship to the affected population.

Conventional peace proposals advanced by the Cameroonian state—most notably the "Special Status" arrangement—operate within a hegemonic logic. Authority remains unidirectional: concessions are granted by the central state to peripheral populations, whose role is limited to passive reception. While such arrangements may temporarily reduce violence, they fail to address the underlying crisis of recognition. Without renewed consent, these measures function as instruments of conflict management rather than resolution.

By contrast, the APJ Peace Plan is **process-first rather than outcome-first**. It insists that legitimacy flows not from the substance of a settlement but from the manner in which it is reached. Its architecture emphasizes four sequential pillars: (a) cessation of hostilities and civilian protection, (b) restitution through historical and constitutional reckoning, (c) inclusive dialogue without preconditions, and (d) an internationally supervised act of self-determination. Crucially, the final political status—independence, federalism, confederation, or reconstituted union—is left open, to be decided through legitimate procedures rather than coercion.

This sequencing reverses the dominant logic of conflict resolution in postcolonial Africa, where outcomes are often negotiated among elites and later presented to populations as faits accomplis. By prioritizing agency restoration, the APJ Plan directly addresses the condition of deferred nationhood. It provides a pathway through which Ambazonians can move from suspended belonging to settled political identity, regardless of the final constitutional arrangement.

Moreover, framing the APJ Plan as restorative justice underscores its ethical orientation. Restorative justice is concerned not primarily with punishment or victory but with repairing relationships, restoring dignity, and reconstituting trust. In deeply divided societies, such processes are indispensable for transforming violence into civic reconciliation. The APJ framework thus situates Ambazonia not as an exceptional case demanding exceptional measures, but as a paradigmatic example of how legitimacy crises must be addressed normatively rather than militarily.

5.3. Comparative Reflections: Deferred Nationhood Beyond Ambazonia

Situating the Ambazonian case within a comparative framework clarifies both its uniqueness and its broader theoretical significance. Deferred nationhood is not exclusive to Ambazonia, but its specific configuration—colonial union, constitutional revocation, diaspora saturation, and protracted low-intensity war—produces distinctive dynamics.

Eritrea offers a contrasting trajectory. Following decades of deferred nationhood under Ethiopian rule, Eritrean independence was achieved through armed struggle and internationally recognized in 1993. While this resolved the identity question, the new state emerged with deeply militarized institutions and authoritarian governance structures. Eritrea demonstrates that resolving deferred nationhood through violence can produce sovereignty without legitimacy, replacing one form of domination with another.

Western Sahara represents the opposite extreme: a case where deferred nationhood has been institutionalized through international paralysis. Decades of UN-mediated processes have failed to deliver self-determination, producing chronic nationalist fatigue and generational disillusionment. Here, the absence of resolution sustains grievance but erodes mobilization, illustrating how indefinite deferral corrodes political agency.

Catalonia and Scotland offer instructive contrast cases. In both contexts, disputes over sovereignty were managed through institutionalized processes that recognized consent as central to legitimacy. Even when outcomes were contested or constrained, the existence of recognized procedures prevented the descent into militarization. These cases demonstrate that the availability of legitimate pathways—rather than specific outcomes—is decisive for maintaining civic peace.

Ambazonia occupies an intermediate position. Like Eritrea and Western Sahara, it suffers from denied recognition; unlike Catalonia and Scotland, it lacks institutionalized mechanisms for consent renewal. The comparative lesson is clear: conflicts rooted in deferred nationhood persist not because identities are too strong, but because procedures for resolving them are absent.

6. Policy Recommendations

The analysis yields several policy-relevant implications for stakeholders engaged in conflict resolution, advocacy, and governance.

First, international actors must shift from outcome-neutral rhetoric to **process-centered engagement**. Support for peace initiatives should be conditioned on the inclusion of internationally guaranteed, participatory mechanisms that restore agency rather than entrench elite bargaining.

Second, Ambazonian nationalist leadership—both at home and in the diaspora—must undertake a deliberate reorientation from militarized resistance to civic statecraft. This entails establishing internal accountability structures, condemning abuses unequivocally, and prioritizing legitimacy over symbolic defiance.

Third, the Cameroonian state must recognize that unity enforced without consent is structurally unstable. Continued reliance on military pacification and cosmetic decentralization will not extinguish the conflict; it will merely defer it. Engaging the APJ framework would require political courage, but it offers the only path toward durable legitimacy.

Fourth, diaspora organizations should recalibrate their role from perpetual mobilization to facilitation of process legitimacy. This includes supporting dialogue initiatives, humanitarian protection, and transitional justice mechanisms rather than exclusively funding armed actors.

7. Limitations and Scope Conditions

This study is subject to several limitations. It adopts a qualitative normative methodology and does not attempt to quantify public opinion or measure battlefield dynamics. Armed actors are analyzed structurally rather than ethnographically, and the APJ Peace Plan is evaluated as a legitimacy framework rather than a feasibility blueprint.

These limitations do not undermine the argument but clarify its scope. The article does not claim that the APJ Plan will succeed mechanically or immediately. Rather, it argues that without a dignity- and consent-restoring process, no solution—military or political—can achieve durability. The framework advanced here is most applicable to conflicts characterized by constitutional rupture, identity denial, and prolonged liminality, and may require adaptation in other contexts.

8. Conclusion

The Ambazonian struggle has evolved from a narrative of resistance against marginalization into a shared crisis of nationalism that transcends geography, generation, and strategy. Early mass mobilization revealed the depth of collective belief in Ambazonian nationhood, but the subsequent failure to translate that belief into institutional coherence—combined with elite hedging, moral erosion, and protracted violence—has produced a condition of deferred nationhood marked by identity dislocation and nationalist fatigue.

This article has argued that the impasse is fundamentally normative. It is rooted in the original rupture of consent and the sustained denial of political dignity. Peace imposed without dignity is a mechanism of control; unity maintained without consent is institutionalized coercion. Without a credible process that restores agency and allows Ambazonians to author their political future-whether within or outside Cameroon—the conflict will not end. It will merely mutate.

By reframing the APJ Peace Plan as a restorative justice mechanism, this study offers a pathway beyond militarized defiance and hollow decentralization. It calls for a mature nationalism grounded not in endless resistance, but in ethical governance, legitimate choice, and civic reconstruction. Nationhood may remain deferred, but the demand for dignity and consent cannot be indefinitely postponed without guaranteeing perpetual instability. The future of peace in Ambazonia depends not on silencing the question of sovereignty, but on finally allowing it to be answered legitimately [14-16].

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