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## University Crisis and Student Strikes in Africa: The Case of the University of Buea (Cameroon)

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### Abstract

The deepening crisis in African universities has had grave consequences for students who are faced with a dramatic deterioration in their living and study conditions and bleak prospects for future employment. The authoritarian management style and political control prevailing in most of these universities form formidable obstacles for students wishing to voice their grievances and organize in defence of their interests. However, African students seem not to be resigned to their fate and instead have displayed a growing activism that is reflected in various forms of protest, including strike actions. This study focuses on two recent violent strikes in the English-speaking University of Buea (UB) in Anglophone Cameroon. Like most other student protests in Africa during the ongoing process of economic and political liberalization, the UB students went on strike in an attempt to improve their unsatisfactory living and study conditions and to create democratic space within and outside the university. What was peculiar to the UB strikes was that they were inspired by deep feelings among the Anglophone student community of being more oppressed and marginalized than their Francophone counterparts, owing to their Anglophone identity, by the Francophone-dominated post-colonial state.

### Résumé

La crise qui s'accroît dans les universités africaines a eu de graves conséquences pour les étudiants qui sont confrontés à une détérioration dramatique de leurs conditions de vie et d'étude et à de sombres perspectives d'emploi. Le style autoritaire de gestion et le contrôle politique qui prévalent dans la plupart de ces

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universités constituent des obstacles redoutables pour les étudiants désireux de faire entendre leurs doléances et de s'organiser pour la défense de leurs intérêts. Toutefois, les étudiants africains ne semblent pas se résigner à leur sort et ont fait preuve d'un activisme croissant qui se reflète dans diverses formes de protestation, notamment les actions de grève. Cette étude se focalise sur deux récentes grèves violentes à l'Université anglophone de Buea (UB) dans le Cameroun anglophone. Comme la plupart des autres mouvements de protestation d'étudiants en Afrique au cours de l'actuel processus de libéralisation économique et politique, les étudiants de l'UB sont partis en grève pour tenter d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie et d'étude insatisfaisantes et de créer un espace démocratique à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de l'université. Ce qui a fait la particularité des grèves, c'est le fait qu'elles aient été inspirées par des sentiments profonds au niveau de la communauté des étudiants anglophones d'être plus opprimés et marginalisés que leurs homologues francophones, du fait de leur identité anglophone, par l'État postcolonial dominé par les Francophones.

### **Introduction**

African universities are in deep crisis nowadays (see Lebeau and Ogunsanya 2000; Nyamnjoh and Jua 2002; Zeilig 2007). Academic standards have been falling rapidly because these universities lack the basic infrastructure needed to cope with massive growth in the student population (Lebeau 1997; Konings 2002). The severe economic crisis and the implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) are further aggravating the situation. The increasing withdrawal of state support for universities, university students and graduates can be seen in the drastic cuts in university budgets, the imposition of tuition fees and additional levies on the student population, and a virtual halt in the recruitment of new graduates in already oversized state bureaucracies (Caffentzis 2000). Many graduates are finding themselves obliged to defer their entry into adulthood indefinitely as they are unable to achieve economic independence, marry and start a family of their own. They are also being forced to abandon their aspirations for elite status. And, last but not least, despite the current political liberalization process, most African universities are continuing to operate under authoritarian management structures and political control that pose a severe threat to academic freedom and autonomy and impede lecturers and students from organizing in defence of their interests and participating in university management.

Faced with this deepening crisis in their universities, students have started fighting for improvements in their living and study conditions and the introduction of a democratic culture in the universities and society as a whole, including the right to express their views, organize in student unions and participate in university management (Amutabi 2002; Konings 2002). While in the past, with a few exceptions, African student protest was sporadic, today it has become endemic

in many countries, continuing year after year in spite of frequent university closures in what appears to have become protracted warfare. Federici and Caffentzis (2000: 115–50) have published a chronology of African university student struggles between 1985 and 1998, and this provides an impressive list of the violent confrontations between students and the forces of law and order in African states. As a result of increasing student activism, African governments have become inclined to treat students as if they were their countries' major enemies, turning campuses into war zones. Police intervention and the occupation of campuses by the security forces are now routine in many places, and so is the presence of intelligence officers and police informants in classrooms (Federici 2000).

This paper focuses on two recent student strikes at the University of Buea (UB) in the South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon. This university, set up in 1993 in the wake of higher education reforms and based on the Anglo-Saxon educational system, is the country's only English-speaking university. The presidential decree establishing the UB raised Anglophone hopes that their university would enjoy a large measure of academic freedom and autonomy and would be endowed with a democratic management style. However, it soon turned out that the UB was not going to be any different from the other newly established universities, which continued to be modelled on the Francophone university system with its excessive centralization, authoritarian management style and political control (Jua and Nyamnjoh 2002; Awasom 2005). Given the fact that by the time the UB opened, the Anglophone region had become a hotbed of rebellion against the ruling regime (Takougang and Krieger 1998; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003), the government was not keen to keep to the terms of the decree establishing the UB, preferring authoritarian to democratic governance so as to ensure political control and loyalty to the regime.

Evidence is provided in this paper that most of the UB students' demands during the 2005 and 2006 strikes were similar to those of students in other Cameroonian and African universities, namely an improvement in their living and study conditions and the introduction of a democratic culture in the universities and society as a whole. What was peculiar to their strike actions, however, and notably the 2006 strike, was their protest against the alleged marginalization of Anglophones in general and Anglophone students in particular in the Francophone-dominated post-colonial state (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003).

As I have argued elsewhere (Konings 2005), Anglophone university students have tended to be more militant than their Francophone counterparts since Cameroon reunification in 1961, feeling more marginalized and oppressed because of their Anglophone identity. They have actually played a vanguard role in the Anglophone struggle for the preservation of the Anglo-Saxon educational

system and the creation of an English-language university. They also became strong supporters of the Anglophone clamour for autonomy either in the form of a return to the federal state or outright secession.

As in many other African countries, the 2005 and 2006 UB student strikes were marked by a high degree of violence. One reason for this was the regular failure of university and government officials to take students seriously and create effective channels of communication and negotiation. Many officials are suspicious of student unions and are hesitant about allowing students to unionize. In these circumstances, often the only way of students pressing home their grievances is the use of violence. Another reason for these violent strikes is that university and government officials are more inclined to solve student problems through repression than dialogue and peaceful negotiation. For the authorities, violence serves as a deterrent to the students from engaging in any similar 'irresponsible' behaviour, but the provocative and brutal actions of the security forces have also tended to fuel student violence.

This study is divided into two parts. The first describes the creation of the UB and the development of its authoritarian management style. The second part discusses the two student strikes in 2005 and 2006. The study is based on extensive reading of primary and secondary sources, in particular reports of these strikes in Cameroonian newspapers, and a number of interviews with the main actors.

### **Authoritarian Governance of the University of Buea**

The University of Buea (UB) was born at a time of deepening economic and political crisis that affected the country as a whole and the system of higher education in particular from the mid-1980s onwards. Until 1993, there was only one university in Cameroon, the University of Yaoundé, which had been set up in 1962. Though officially a bilingual institution, the University of Yaoundé clearly remained a Francophone institute. Not only was it based on the French university system but courses were mainly given in French, thus putting English-speaking students at a disadvantage (Konings 2002, 2005; Awasom 2005).

The administrative structure of the university was modelled on the French tradition with its excessive centralization, and it became almost a replica of the one-party system initiated in 1966. The university's administration appeared to be predominantly geared towards political control with, for example, national security agents, disguised as students, spying on both students and lecturers. There was no clear separation between politics and academics. All appointments at the university, from the rector to messengers and cleaners, were political appointments, and for a university career loyalty to the regime was more important than intellectual merit (Nyamnjoh 1999). The university was administered in an authoritarian manner with little dialogue between the university authorities and

the academic staff and students. Unlike in some other West and Central African states (Konings 2004a), lecturers and students were not allowed to organize in defence of their interests. The so-called student delegates or representatives – those responsible for imposing the decisions of the university authorities on students while taking note of those who complained (Dibussi 1991: 16; Mbu 1993: 107) – were not elected by students after 1986 but instead were appointed by the administration. Worse still, they tended to become informants who pointed out subversives to the regime in times of crisis. A lack of participation in university affairs created the impression among students that strikes were the only avenue to change in the university.

By 1990, there were explosive problems in higher education. The number of students had increased from 35 in 1962 to 10,000 in 1982 and 41,000 by 1990 (Mehler 1998: 59; Mbu 1993: 82) but the university infrastructure was only able to cope with at most 7,000 students. Lecture rooms, libraries, laboratories and office space for lecturers were inadequate and lacked the necessary equipment. And the university hostel could only offer accommodation to a limited number of students. So students were forced to rent rooms at exorbitant prices in the so-called mini-cities around the university. These problems were compounded by the deepening economic crisis characterized by a depleted state treasury, the late and irregular payment of student bursaries and staff salaries, and a low rate of execution of the university budget. During the political liberalization process, which started in 1990, students and lecturers began to organize in autonomous unions. Besides trying to represent and defend their members' interests, these unions also demanded the implementation of democratic reforms at the university and in society as a whole (Konings 2002, 2004a).

To help solve the university crisis, the government eventually decided to decentralize university education, against the advice of the World Bank, which strongly discouraged the creation of new tertiary educational institutions during structural adjustment. Presidential decree No. 93/026 of 19 January 1993, which launched a number of higher education reforms, established six state universities in different regional centres and spelled out their governance structures and regulations (Njeuma et al., 1999). Four were to be bilingual: the University of Yaoundé I (Centre Province), the University of Yaoundé II (Centre Province), the University of Douala (Littoral Province) and the University of Dschang (West Province). Of the two remaining universities, the University of Ngaoundere (Adamawa Province) was to be a French-speaking institution and the University of Buea (South West Province) was to be English-speaking. In an apparent attempt to meet the World Bank's cost-saving demands in higher education, the decree eliminated state bursaries to students and demanded that students pay annual tuition fees of FCFA 50,000.

Significantly, the presidential decree stipulated that the UB's governance structure would be unique in the sense that it would be based on Anglo-Saxon traditions and values. In sharp contrast to the newly established universities in Francophone Cameroon, the UB was therefore to enjoy the freedom to elect its principal officers from the Vice-Chancellor to the Heads of Department and to determine its academic orientation without overbearing government interference (Awasom 2005). It is widely believed in Anglophone Cameroon that the creation of an Anglo-Saxon university in Buea, with a relatively large measure of autonomy and democratic governance, was one of the Francophone-dominated regime's main strategies to placate Anglophones and gain admission to the Commonwealth of Nations.

However, it soon became evident that the regime did not intend to implement the regulations in the presidential decree and establish an alternative university system in Anglophone Cameroon. In fact, as a result of widespread opposition in Anglophone Cameroon to the regime in power, the government became more interested in introducing the Francophone university system of authoritarian governance and political control into the UB than the Anglo-Saxon university system of democratic governance and academic freedom and autonomy.

By 1990 widespread popular discontent with the ruling regime could be observed in Anglophone Cameroon. The majority of the Anglophone population held the corrupt, authoritarian regime responsible for the severe economic crisis and the draconian structural adjustment measures, resulting in a loss of its legitimacy. Taking advantage of widespread Anglophone resentment of their allegedly second-rate citizenship in the Francophone-dominated unitary state, John Fru Ndi, a charismatic Anglophone leader, launched the first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Province in Anglophone Cameroon in May 1990. The SDF quickly became the country's major opposition party, extending its influence from Anglophone Cameroon to many parts of Francophone Cameroon (Konings 2004b). The year the UB was established was also the start of political organization and agitation in Anglophone Cameroon for constitutional reforms. Newly created Anglophone nationalist movements began to demand first a return to the federal state and later outright secession (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). The so-called Southern Cameroons National Congress (SCNC) became the spearhead of the Anglophone strive for an independent Anglophone state. Moreover, the Anglo-Saxon UB was unsurprisingly going to be hit by similar problems as other state universities during the continuing economic crisis and economic liberalization.

As the World Bank had previously warned, the 1993 university reforms created serious problems concerning the funding of basic infrastructure to match the surging enrolment levels at the six newly created state universities. As in the

other state universities, UB students and teachers were dissatisfied with their deteriorating living and working conditions. Students vehemently opposed some of the 1993 university reform measures, in particular the abolition of scholarships and the introduction of tuition fees. Besides a heavy workload, teachers faced financial problems: there were regular delays in the payment of their salaries and, even worse, incomes were dramatically affected when, in 1993, there was a drastic 60–70 per cent cut in civil servants' pay, followed by a 50 per cent devaluation of the CFA Franc in January 1994.

In its determined efforts to establish control over any form of opposition at the newly created UB, the regime did not hesitate to violate the provisions of the presidential decree establishing the UB by appointing all the principal university officials and making their tenure of office indefinite. The first Vice-Chancellor (VC) was Dr Dorothy Limunga Njeuma, who belonged to the local Bakweri ethnic group and was a member of the Political Bureau of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and a former Vice-Minister of National Education. According to the presidential decree, the VC was supposed to be appointed for a fixed tenure of four years (which could be renewed once) and from among members of the 'professorial rank of Anglo-Saxon training following recommendation of the UB Senate and Council'. Contrary to these provisions, Dr Njeuma was an associate professor who was appointed by the regime without any recommendation from the university's Senate and Council and her tenure of office turned out to be indefinite since she was still the UB's VC in 2005 (Jua and Nyamnjoh 2002; Awasom 2005).

In her characteristically authoritarian style of governance, Dr Njeuma started to police the production of critical scholarship, intimidate and persecute members of opposition parties and organizations, and crush student and teachers' unions (Jua and Nyamnjoh 2002; Schmidt-Soltau 1999). The right of students to form unions and go on strike was recognized under the 1990 political liberalization legislation and, as a result, the UB authorities allowed a students' union, the so-called University of Buea Students' Union (UBSU), to operate on campus. During the 1993–95 period, however, the USBU staged a number of strikes to try to safeguard student rights and in protest against the UB administration's attempts to raise tuition fees. The UB authorities reacted by taking a series of punitive measures. Firstly, following the initial student strike in 1993, Dr Njeuma ordered students and their parents to sign an undertaking never to indulge in strike actions. Secondly, student leaders were dismissed from the university and refused admission to any state university in Cameroon. Strikingly, a number of these dismissed student leaders, like Ebenezer Akwanga, formed the very militant Anglophone nationalist movement in 1995, the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL), with the aim of achieving an independent Anglophone state



through armed struggle (Konings 2005). And thirdly, the UBSU was banned from the UB in 1995. Subsequently, the UB authorities introduced what the teachers' union later described as a 'compartmentalised, dependent and ineffective faculty representation of students' (Synes, UB Branch 2005a). These student faculty representatives tended to be seen by the student population as part of the existing political control system within the university.

During Dr Njeuma's time in office, the UB administration was equally hostile towards the local branch of the university teachers' union, the *Syndicat des Enseignants du Supérieur* (SYNES), which was founded in June 1991 as the first autonomous trade union in the Cameroonian public service (Konings 2004a). The SYNES was subject to severe government repression until 1997 on the pretext that civil servants were legally prohibited from forming trade unions. But even after eventual government recognition of the union, Dr Njeuma continued to stymie SYNES activities as well as intimidate and punish local branch leaders and members, even dismissing some assistant lecturers for being members of SYNES.

Dr Njeuma succeeded in establishing a large measure of control over the university community for a considerable period of time by effectively using carrot-and-stick methods, but in 2005 UB students began to revolt against their unsatisfactory living and working conditions and the university authorities' authoritarian governance style. To achieve their goals, they demanded recognition of the revived students' union and the removal of Dr Njeuma as the VC of the university.

### **The 2005 UB Students' Strike**

On 27 April 2005, UB students joined the strike action initiated by their colleagues in Cameroon's oldest university, the University of Yaoundé I. Since the start of the political liberalization process in the early 1990s, students at the University of Yaoundé had been organizing into unions in an attempt to improve their living and working conditions and promote a democratic culture in the university and society as a whole. This led them into a series of violent confrontations with the forces of law and order and the newly created ethnic militia that were closely allied to the regime in power (Konings 2002).

When these strike actions failed to deliver the students' most essential demands, a few University of Yaoundé students decided to change tactics and, advocating non-violent actions, went on hunger strike. The first hunger strike began on 29 September 2004, less than two weeks before the 11 October presidential elections. A tiny group of five students that was to call itself the *Association pour la défense des droits des étudiants du Cameroun* (ADDEC), led by Mouafo Djontu, resorted to this extreme form of action with a view to bringing pressure to bear on presidential hopefuls to commit themselves to an



improvement in student conditions if elected. In a document entitled 'Five Points of the Cameroonian Students' Rights Association on the Plight of Students to the Political Elite', ADDEC called for the formulation of a student status, the withdrawal of the FCFA 50,000 tuition fee, the reintroduction of scholarships (at least for research students), the election of rectors, deans and other university officials, and the creation of a national body to oversee competitive government examinations. This first hunger strike was simply ignored by the political elite.

Six months later, on 13 April 2005, the same group embarked on a second hunger strike after having written an open letter to the Head of State in which they raised similar grievances and equally called for better conditions for studying, of assessment, accommodation and food. Although the government and university authorities continued to ignore their demands, growing sympathy could be observed for the hunger strikers among the student community. On 20 April, a group of sympathizers went on strike over specific grievances, in particular the provision of drinking water and better toilets. They were soon joined by other students who were shocked by the university rector's allegation that the strikers were non-students who were pursuing a political agenda. Almost the whole student population took to the streets, blocking the traffic and defying heavily armed troops after the government-controlled radio and television stations started broadcasting provocative statements. In response to the ADDEC leadership's appeal, they tried to avoid violence. Desperate attempts by the government to break the strike by giving fake student leaders an opportunity on television to strongly condemn and call off the strike did not have the desired effect. When the government finally realized that the strike could only be ended by peaceful negotiation, it had already moved beyond the confines of the University of Yaoundé I (Arranz 2005). By the end of April, students in five of the six state universities were on strike, the only exception being students at the University of Ngaoundere.

On 27 April, UB students joined their striking colleagues in Yaoundé on what they termed a 'solidarity strike' (Manga and Tambenkongho 2005). It would appear that that morning five students from the University of Yaoundé had been in Buea to enlist support for their strike. In sharp contrast to the strike at the University of Yaoundé I, the strike at the UB rapidly took on a violent character (Gbadago 2005). It was initially more or less spontaneous but lacked any effective leadership and coordination because of the absence of a real students' union that could have controlled its membership, represented its interests and entered into peaceful negotiations with the university authorities. The existing body of student representatives from the various UB faculties lacked legitimacy and confidence among the student community and played no role in the strike. The chairperson of the college of presidents of student representatives, Elvis Damsi, even confessed

that the strike started without his knowledge and that the strikers refused to tell him why they had gone on strike, accusing him and his colleagues of being spies for the university authorities (Manga 2005a). A second reason for the outbreak of violence was that the authoritarian university and government officials lacked the necessary tact and patience to manage the strike. Their attempts to crush the strike and their repeated refusal to enter into peaceful negotiations had the unintended effect of prolonging the strike and fuelling student violence. The provocative and brutal behaviour of the forces of law and order also encouraged the students' violent response.

When the strike started, the VC of the UB, Dr Dorothy Njeuma, was on an official assignment abroad and in her absence, the UB Registrar, Dr Herbert Endeley, who had been a target of previous student attacks during strikes at the UB because of his proven lack of tact and arrogance, made an abortive attempt to placate the disgruntled students. Following his failure to enter into dialogue with the strikers, the UB authorities decided to call upon the forces of law and order to bring the situation under control.

According to a number of observers, the predominantly Francophone security forces were out to teach the Anglophone students an unforgettable lesson. After the students had ignored the UB Registrar's warning not to leave the campus, violent clashes took place between the students, who had barricaded the streets round the university, and the security forces. Several students were wounded and arrested. Students then went on the rampage on the campus, damaging a number of vehicles and destroying a lot of university property. In response, the security forces attacked the students, breaking into student hostels in the nearby Molyko neighbourhood and severely beating the inhabitants, destroying and looting their property, and making arrests (Manga 2005b). The next day the strikers decided to march on the South West Governor's office to demand the release of their imprisoned colleagues, but they were prevented from reaching it by combat-ready police at a road blockade. In the subsequent confrontation, two students were shot dead by the police.

In this grave situation, some of the informal student leaders of the strike revived the University of Buea Students' Union (UBSU), which had been banned after the 1995 student strike. Five of the six USBU leaders were students in the Political Science Department, which was the reason why the VC, Dr Njeuma, later accused the department's lecturers of indoctrinating their students in the dangerous ideologies of revolution and rebellion. The USBU's president, Walter Onekon Angwere, then claimed that the newly formed students' union was ready to enter into dialogue with the university authorities and put forward the students' grievances in a peaceful way. Some of the initial USBU demands reiterated previous ADDEC demands: the abolition of tuition fees (FCFA 53,000 at the

UB compared to FCFA 50,000 at other state universities), the offer of repeat examinations on all courses, the granting of scholarships to postgraduate students, the upgrading of the library and laboratories and an extension to the lecture halls, the provision of better-quality food and drinking water as well as adequate toilets, and the recruitment of better-qualified teaching staff, whose working conditions also had to be improved (Gbadago 2005).

Dr Njeuma, who in the meantime had returned to Cameroon, bluntly refused to enter into dialogue with the UBSU leaders. She declined to recognize the newly revived UBSU, stressing that its leadership was self-proclaimed and had bad intentions and, unlike the student representatives from the various UB faculties, UBSU leaders had not been elected by the students and, above all, had violated UB regulations by engaging in violent strike actions. For these and other reasons, including personal safety, she simply ignored any UBSU invitation to talk to the strikers at their meetings. The only concession she was willing to make was to receive some of the strikers' representatives in her office.

In reaction to the VC's authoritarian behaviour and continued police violence, the UBSU leadership added some new demands, calling for the immediate replacement and transfer of the long-serving VC, recognition by the university authorities of the revived students' union, an immediate government report on the killing of the two UB students during the strike, the release of all detained students, and the immediate withdrawal of the forces of law and order from the campus. Interestingly, they also requested the removal of an allegedly dreadful 'shrine' that, according to them, was strategically located near the university's entrance. They claimed that this shrine, where they believed dogs were burned alive, was being deliberately used by the VC to spiritually intimidate opponents of the university authorities. There is ample evidence that students actually feared to go past this shrine during the strike (Tanch 2005).

The UBSU leadership continued to dismiss any allegations that the strike was politically motivated. Some members of the South West elite saw it as a manifestation of the existing South West–North West divide and conflict within the Anglophone community in general and the UB in particular (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). According to them, North Westerners formed the majority of the student population and teaching staff at the UB, and they were using the strike to establish North West hegemony in a South West university. The local Bakweri elite, who dominated the UB administration, were particularly shocked when they discovered that the Vice-President of the UBSU, Alain Martin Nako, was a Bakweri. The apparent involvement of Bakweri students in the strike largely undermined their claims that the strike was a North West plot. Other circles, especially government officials, alleged that either the major Anglophone opposition party, the SDF, or the Anglophone secessionist movement, the SCNC,

was involved in the strike. They pointed out that the SCNC had strongly condemned the killing of Anglophone students by the predominantly Francophone security forces. Although Anglophone sentiments were undoubtedly raised by the government's different approach to student strike action in the Francophone and Anglophone areas – peaceful negotiations at the University of Yaoundé I and repressive actions at the UB – there is no evidence of any direct SCNC involvement in the strike (Feko 2005).

A second round of violence broke out on 5 May following the objection of the South West Governor, Thomas Ejake Mbonda, to an earlier announcement that students would escort the corpse of Gilbert Nforlem Forbi, one of the students killed by the security forces, from the Buea mortuary to Mile 17 Motor Park – a distance of some ten kilometres – from where it would be transported to Bamenda for burial. Despite vehement student protest, the Governor announced that the escort was to end at Bongo Square, just a kilometre from the mortuary. When the peaceful procession arrived at Bongo Square, he ordered the police to prevent the students from escorting the hearse any further by using water cannons to disperse them. With their plan to march right up to Mile 17 Motor Park frustrated, the angry students went on a rampage. They barricaded the main roads in town, set fire to tyres along the road, destroyed lamp posts that were waiting to be installed along the Buea two-lane road and succeeded in razing a police jeep hidden behind a travel agency at Mile 17 Motor Park. It was to avoid further confrontation with the students that heavily armed police removed the corpse of the other slain UB student, Aloysius Amboeur Duhuanja, from the mortuary during the night of 10 May and, amid high security, took it to Ekona where they handed it over to the aggrieved parents (Manga 2005c).

Faced with the university authorities' failure to bring the student strikes at the state universities under control, President Paul Biya decided to intervene once again. He had earlier offered two subventions, amounting to approximately FCFA 5 billion, to these universities to resolve their most urgent problems. On 13 May he appointed a commission led by a former minister, David Abouem à Tchoyi, to investigate the situation in the state universities from 16 May to 9 June. However, when it visited the UB on 18–19 May, the UBSU leadership declared that it was going to discuss its problems with the commission only after the VC had come to meet the strikers and entered into dialogue with them. Since the VC refused to do so, the commission was bound to leave the UB without having held any talks with students. It is noteworthy that, as in previous inspection commissions appointed by the government, the David Abouem à Tchoyi Commission's report was never made public (Adams 2005b).

In the meantime, the VC had started instructing students to return to classes, but made this resumption of classes conditional upon them signing an undertaking

of good conduct, in which they would pledge to abide by the university's rules and regulations. What angered students even more was that the forms to be filled for this purpose could only be acquired after the payment of FCFA 2,000. In reaction, the UBSU leadership warned students not to sign such an undertaking, bearing in mind the union's motto: 'No dialogue, no classes'. In sharp contrast to the UBSU, some newly established rival groups, like the UB Association for the Promotion of Non Violence (UBAPNOV) and the UB branch of the Cameroon Students' Solidarity Association (CAMSA) called on students to go back to classes and 'to avoid making themselves hostage of mates who don't seem to care about the future' (Manga 2005d). The university hierarchy reportedly held meetings with these rival groups, but when the large majority of the students supported the UBSU stand, the VC started threatening the strikers. In a press release, she instructed students to go back to classes on 23 May, otherwise they would be considered as having withdrawn from the university. The UBSU leadership's response to this threat was to circulate tracts on 22 May that appealed to the strikers not to heed the VC's press release.

A few days later, on 24 May, another bloody clash between students and the security forces took place. As had been the pattern during the strike, the students had rallied that morning at their meeting points near the university gates, which they had named 'Jerusalem' and 'Bethlehem'. Apparently convinced that the security forces had lost control of the strike, South West Governor Thomas Ejake Mbonda ordered them to disperse the strikers. This led to renewed violent confrontations between both parties and, at a certain point, the security forces started shooting with live ammunition. A passing taxi driver was shot dead, several students received bullet wounds and many others were arrested. The students, in turn, attacked members of the security forces, seized their guns and ammunition, and set fire to a police personnel carrier (Adams 2005a).

The next day the local branch of SYNES again strongly condemned the violence employed by students and the forces of law and order during the protracted strike, in particular the security forces' use of live ammunition. It stressed that the UB crisis had gone on for too long because of an absence of dialogue and called on all lecturers and students to stay at home until the crisis was resolved (Synes, UB Branch 2005a and b).

Since the UB administration appeared to be unwilling to enter into any dialogue with the students, the Minister of Higher Education, Professor Jacques Fame Ndong, finally decided to intervene in an effort to end the protracted strike. On 27 May he arrived in Buea and invited the students to meet him. After just a few hours of negotiations on the basis of a memorandum drawn up by the UBSU leadership, the Minister and the students had agreed upon most of the students' demands. These included the legal authorization and recognition of the

UBSU, the granting of immunity to all strike leaders, a withdrawal of the security forces from the campus, a reduction in the tuition fees from FCFA 53,000 to FCFA 50,000, an increase in the number of courses in the resit examination programme, a reduction in the price of food in the university restaurant from FCFA 150 to FCFA 100, the withdrawal of the VC's order that students should sign an undertaking of good conduct before the resumption of classes, the provision of better toilets, water taps and public address systems in the lecture halls by the administration, and the installation of a joint student-administration committee to run the affairs of the university. Both parties also agreed to a resumption of classes on 30 May (UBSU Memorandum 2005).

Most people thought that things would return to normal at the UB after this agreement but new tensions soon arose in relations between the students and the VC. On 8 June, the students started boycotting classes for two reasons. First, the VC had brought forward the start of the second-semester examinations from 23 June to 15 June. The students had instead expected an extension of the semester following their month-long strike action, and they saw the VC's action as a punitive measure. Second, the VC had continued to oppose any recognition of the UBSU and strongly believed that the agreement between the UBSU and the Minister of Higher Education condoned the UBSU's violent strike actions and its defiance of duly constituted authority. She prohibited any UBSU meeting on campus and regularly threatened its leadership.

Shaken by the students' renewed strike action, the VC sent a delegation led by the Deputy VC, Professor Vincent Titanji, to meet the strikers. After listening to their grievances, Professor Titanji announced that the second-semester examinations had now been rescheduled to begin on 21 June. He also claimed that the UB administration had already recognized the UBSU but the students demanded proof of this recognition and insisted that the VC should sign and publish a statement acknowledging recognition of the students' union (Shu 2005).

At the behest of the VC, the UB Senate decided on 3 August that the annual convocation ceremony when degrees are awarded to UB graduates would be suspended. The decision seemed to have been taken as a result of student misconduct during the strike, but the cancellation of the convocation ceremony came directly on the heels of a VC proposal that the strike leaders and lecturers, who were suspected of having supported or instigated the students' strike, were to be identified and punished. The UBSU leadership strongly condemned the Senate's decision to cancel the 2005 convocation ceremony, calling it a serious violation of the 'Anglo-Saxon tradition'. It recalled having written a letter of apology to the Head of State, local government and the university authorities for the damages and inconvenience caused by the strike (Manga 2005e).



The VC became even more dissatisfied with the students' behaviour when she was informed that the 'illegal' UBSU had addressed a memorandum to the Head of State. And even worse, in this memorandum its leadership had 'dared' to request that he abolish the FCFA 50,000 university tuition fee and publish the findings of both the commission of enquiry into the killing of the two UB students during the strike and the David Abouem à Tchoyi fact-finding commission into the state of affairs in all state universities (Manga 2005f).

On 26 August, the VC organized a press conference at which the UB authorities publicly reacted to the crisis that had affected the university. In her preliminary remarks on the crisis, the VC stated that the agreement signed by the Minister of Higher Education and the UBSU leadership on 27 May was 'without consultation with the university authorities and could be described as a measure to prevent thousands of innocent students from losing a whole academic year', implying that some of the points of the agreement were not binding. She then berated the entire student body for 'its uncouth and unruly behaviour' during the strike, but the UBSU faced even greater odium. According to her, the UBSU was 'an illegal, self-proclaimed insurgent student group' that had masterminded the violent strike and had constantly demonstrated an attitude towards her person of 'absolute defiance, insults, mud-slinging and character assassination which mimicked the attitude of some teaching staff'. While putting most of the blame on the students and their leaders, she suspected that some members of the UB teaching staff and political movements had incited the students to engage in this violent strike (Manga 2005f).

On 10 September, President Paul Biya again intervened in the university crisis. He nominated former ministers as presidents of newly created administrative councils in the six state universities, most probably in an attempt to reinforce political control (Pibasso 2005). Professor Peter Agbor Tabi, a former Minister of Higher Education who had become notorious for his extreme authoritarianism and brutal repression of student revolts at the University of Yaoundé and the University of Buea in the 1990s (Konings 2002), was appointed president of the UB administrative council. President Biya also seized this occasion to either punish or reward the university rectors for their role during the strike. The rectors of the University of Yaoundé I and the University of Dschang were dismissed, while the UB's VC, Dr Njeuma, was promoted to rector of the country's largest and oldest university, the University of Yaoundé I. Professor Cornelius Lambi, the then Dean of the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences at the UB, was appointed VC of the UB to replace Dr Njeuma. During his installation on 13 September, the Minister of Higher Education, Professor Jacques Fame Ndongo, told him to enforce the qualities of social dialogue, good governance and cooperation in the Anglo-Saxon-oriented UB (Nana and Tah 2005).



Professor Lambi did indeed do his utmost to improve the UB administration's relations with the UBSU, regularly inviting its leadership to discuss matters affecting the students. In his end-of-year speech, he announced that the UB administration had decided not only to organize the annual convocation ceremony but also to recognize the UBSU (Chia 2005). UBSU elections were subsequently organized with the assistance of the UB authorities, and David Abia, a political science student, was elected as the student union's president.

### **The 2006 UB Student Strike**

On 27 November 2006 UB students went on strike again because of the Minister of Higher Education's intervention in the competitive entrance examinations to the UB's newly created Medical School, which was planning to offer places to only 60 first-year students. After the written examinations, the VC of the UB, Professor Cornelius Lambi, had signed a list of 127 candidates for admission to the oral examinations, all of them Anglophones. Shortly afterwards, the Minister of Higher Education, Professor Jacques Fame Ndong, imposed a new list upon the UB authorities that included an additional 26 Francophone candidates (Azoro 2006).

The students were furious about the Minister's intervention. They perceived it as attempted fraud by a high-ranking government official at a time when both the government and the UB's administration were engaged in various anti-corruption campaigns. They therefore insisted that the original list be maintained and said that they were going on strike in solidarity with the Anglophone candidates whose chances of admission had been reduced by the Francophone-dominated regime's addition of undeserving Francophone candidates. From the original 876 candidates who took the written examinations, no fewer than 600 Anglophones had scored higher than the best Francophone.

The students' anger was fuelled by the VC's reaction to the new list. They had expected him to reject the new list outright and maintain the original that he had already signed. The VC instead told them that he had made a 'monumental error' by signing the original list:

This was the first time of organising an examination that directly recruits trainees into public services. I want to apologise that I caused the problem because I signed a list that the minister was supposed to endorse. (Sumelong 2006)

Curiously, although the VC was taking the blame, the wording creating the Faculty of Medicine lacked any clause about the Minister signing the list of candidates to be admitted to the oral examination. It only stipulated that the Minister was to endorse the final list of successful candidates after the oral examinations.

Unsurprisingly, many observers were therefore inclined to believe that, although the VC had been entitled to sign the original list, he did not dare to tell the truth.

The UBSU leadership used the opportunity to voice other grievances. In a memorandum, it denounced the formidable hike in tuition fees for a number of postgraduate studies, the payment of FCFA 1,000 for the collection of transcripts, and the poor quality of the food in the UB restaurant.

Soon after the strike started on the morning of 27 November, the VC, who had built up a good relationship with the students in the course of his career, came out to address the strikers and eventually succeeded in calming them down by promising he would look into all their grievances. The situation changed dramatically in the afternoon, however. Probably under pressure from the Minister of Higher Education, the VC then announced on the radio that all the candidates on the Ministry's list were to come for oral examinations at the Central Administration building. When the students later got wind of this, they assembled at the examination venue. After desperate calls for the orals to be stopped, the embittered students overturned and destroyed the cars of lecturers parked in front of the building. The new Pro-Chancellor, Professor Peter Agbor Tabi, then arrived on the scene in an attempt to placate the students, but they refused to listen to him, recalling his excesses in controlling students when he had been the Minister of Higher Education, and chased him away. They said that they would continue their strike until the original list of 127 candidates was reintroduced. They also demanded the immediate publication of the findings of the presidential commission that had investigated the killing of the two UB students during the April–May 2005 strike.

On the evening of 29 November, heavily armed riot police went on to the university campus and began beating up students and firing tear gas. As the police descended, the students dispersed and streamed on to the main road in the Molyko neighbourhood, pulling down kiosks, billboards and other structures and setting them on fire. The police followed and a running battle ensued. More tear gas was fired and the students replied with a volley of stones. That was when shots rang out, killing two students. Police violence continued the next day when they attacked and wounded several students and even a number of people who lived and worked in Molyko (Sumelong 2006).

In a communiqué issued on 30 November and signed by the Secretary-General in the Prime Minister's office, Jules Doret Ndong, the regime first and foremost blamed the VC of the UB for his irregular publication of the original list of 127 Anglophone candidates. Some members of the regime began to accuse him of having incited an Anglophone war against Francophones and even of being a SCNC member himself. As had been the case during the

April–May 2005 strike, the regime tried to justify the killing of two more UB students by fabricating a ‘police self-defence’ narrative:

A violent mob armed with machetes, stones and locally-made hunting guns, invaded the university campus with the ‘strong determination’ to ransack the university computer centre. After being pushed back by the forces of law and order, the assailants turned their attention to the Molyko police station firing at the police. Two of the assailants were killed as the police defended themselves (Dibussi 2006).

The regime then ordered an investigation into the events and called upon the Minister of Higher Education to take all the measures necessary for a resumption of classes, to make sure that the process and the existing rules for admission into higher education institutions were respected, and to punish anybody who was involved in acts of violence and vandalism.

In a communiqué on 1 December, the Minister of Higher Education, Jacques Fame Ndong, tried to further explain why he had added 26 Francophone candidates to the original list signed by the VC of the UB. According to him, he was obliged not only to respect the existing rules and regulations that the VC of the UB, as he himself had publicly acknowledged, had violated but also to take into account the ethnic balance, which was a guarantee of national integration and stability (cf. Nkwi and Nyamnjoh 1997). This made UB students and other Anglophones wonder why the regime seemed to be more concerned with the principle of ethnic balance in Anglophone tertiary institutions than in Francophone ones (Dang 2006). Apparently, in an effort to placate the UB students and the Anglophone population as a whole, the Minister later announced that the number of first-year students to the UB Medical School would be increased from 60 to 86.

Although students had failed to forestall the holding of oral examinations for admission to the UB School of Medicine, they still refused to adhere to the UB administration’s decision to resume classes on 7 December. The student union, however, seemed to be increasingly inclined to end the strike through peaceful negotiation. UBSU leaders made such negotiations conditional on the prior release of their comrades who had been arrested by the police during the strike, and the withdrawal of the forces of law and order from the campus. While the UB authorities rejected the union’s preconditions, they did agree on the need for negotiations and called upon certain Anglophone personalities known for their intellectual authority and moral integrity to bring the striking students to the negotiating table and mediate between both parties. The Regional Secretary of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, Christopher Tiku Tambi, played an outstanding role as mediator and was instrumental in reaching a ‘package deal’.

As part of this deal, the South West Governor, Louis Eyeya Zanga, finally agreed on 8 December to release five UBSU leaders and twelve students who had been picked up by the police during the strike. The UBSU leadership then started negotiations with the UB administration, which led to the signing of an agreement on 12 December. The Memorandum of Agreement for resolving the UB strike stated that:

... a plea be forwarded by the UB authorities to the government requesting the publication of findings for students who were shot during the April–May 2005 strike and the November–December 2006 strike, payment of hospital bills for students injured during the strike, absolute and unconditional immunity to all the UB students for acts committed during the strike and complete evacuation of the forces of law and order from the campus as the UB students promise a high degree of responsibility void of violence and vandalism.

Following this agreement, David Abia, the UBSU president, appealed to the students to resume classes, but the students refused to do so, arguing that a number of student grievances had not yet been resolved (Nana 2006).

On 14 December, a presidential decree dismissed Professor Lambi from the office of VC and nominated Professor Vincent Titanji, one of the UB Deputy VCs, as his successor. With the renewed assistance of Christopher Tiku Tambi, Professor Titanji succeeded in reaching a final agreement with the UBSU on 30 December. In this agreement, the UB authorities conceded to most students' demands, except their demand to maintain the original list of 127 Anglophone candidates for the Medical School. During the strike, the UB Pro-Chancellor, Professor Peter Agbor Tabi, had constantly stressed that 'the ministerial list of 153 candidates was not negotiable' (Dang 2006). The most important points were that the UB authorities agreed to grant immunity to students who had destroyed public and private property during the strike; to reduce the tuition fees for all postgraduate programmes to FCFA 50,000 and to refund all postgraduate students who had paid more than that amount; to offer transcripts to students at no cost (extra copies of transcripts, however, were to be paid for at the normal price of FCFA 1,000 each); to table a request for the publication of the findings of the presidential commissions that investigated the killings of the UB students in the 2005 and 2006 strikes; and to offer the UBSU an office on the university premises. The students, in turn, agreed to resume classes on 3 January 2007 (Sumelong and Nana 2007).

### Conclusion

This study has shown that the recent violent student strikes at the UB were first and foremost an expression of widespread student unrest and protest in Africa in an era of economic and political liberalization (cf. Federici and Caffentzis 2000; Zeilig 2007). Having become frustrated by the dramatic deterioration in their living and study conditions and the lack of democratic space within and outside the university, UB students had come to see strike action as the only way to demonstrate their grievances to the authoritarian government of Cameroon and the university authorities.

What was unique to the UB students' activism and raised their militancy was their feeling of being more marginalized and oppressed than their Francophone counterparts because of their Anglophone identity. They vehemently resisted the Francophone-dominated post-colonial state's attempt to transform the newly created UB, which was based on the Anglo-Saxon university system, from a space of freedom and democratic governance into one of domination and political control over Anglophone 'rebels' and dissidents. They engaged in a series of violent strikes between 1993 and 1995, leading not to the desired improvement in their position but instead to the banning of their leaders and union from the UB. They strongly condemned the Francophone Minister of Higher Education's attempt in 2006 to add a number of Francophone students to the original list of only Anglophone students who had achieved admission to the oral examinations for entry to the newly established UB Medical School. They were shocked by the brutal repression of their strike actions in 2005 and 2006 by the predominantly Francophone security forces that resulted in several deaths and many students being wounded.

While the students understandably failed to bring about substantial changes in their predicament during the ongoing economic crisis and structural adjustment and to overturn the authoritarian state's imposition of a new list of successful candidates for admission to the oral examinations of the UB Medical School, they nevertheless succeeded in winning a number of important concessions. The most significant gain was the government and university authorities' eventual recognition of the revived student union that created new democratic openings in the prevailing authoritarian governance of the university. The UBSU proved itself capable of negotiating a settlement to the 2005 and 2006 strikes that was acceptable to the authorities and students alike.

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