

Student Strikes in Higher Institutions of Learning in Cameroon: An Instrument for Improving Campus Conditions, 1973-2016

Damian T. AKARA¹ and Rigobert MAILA²

¹ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6067-7433>

¹Corresponding author. He holds a PhD in History and is Associate professor in the University of Maroua, Cameroon

²PhD research fellow in History, University of Maroua, Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the incidence of student strike actions in state universities and /or higher institutions of learning in Cameroon. The students through the medium of civil disobedience have consistently expressed their discontent on university campuses in an attempt to obtain better conditions of living and learning. Backed by some iconographic sources, this study focuses on fundamental changes that are characterized by the various ways in which strikes were manifested. It brings to the limelight the propellants of the strike actions, the modes characterizing the disobedience, continuity and breakdowns in different ways on university campuses in Cameroon. Over the years, the students inter-changeably used various modes of defiance which rested between violent and non-violent forms of demonstration. As such, the results show that in spite of the odds, the student strikes served as a bargaining force for the enhancement of life on various campuses.

Key words: Students, strike, violence, non-violence, university campus.

Introduction

Following the education reforms of 1962 in Cameroon, the country witnessed the transformation of the University Institute of Yaounde into a full-fledged university on its own right. This date epitomized the emergence of "... a Cameroonian student class identifying itself as a social actor capable of participating in the construction of the life of the country" (MINESUP, 2014: 18). In Cameroon, the dynamics of the quest for the well-being and freedom was manifested through the emergence and sporadic instances of disorder on the university campus. This "voluntary" and

sometimes “involuntary” action, with episodic or continuous use of (il)legitimate means impacted on the choice of government policies (Weiner, 1971: 2-6). The curtain raiser of the disorders was recorded on 2 December 1973 with one of the earliest mobilizations and protests by students on the campus of the University of Yaounde, the lone university in Cameroon at the time (Morillas, 2010: 60). Following the creation of a number of state universities after three decades, a series of similar events would wobble the life of various campuses at irregular intervals. Often misunderstood by the authorities, students went on strike generally without coherence or organization for a request for the improvement of living conditions and studies on campus. The students’ militant actions often gave rise to inestimable losses, thus arousing the anger of the university authorities and the government at large. The government was at times "unable to manage the excesses [if not] by repression with methods that were both fair and unfair, which only helped to make the students more radical and impulsive " (Woudamiké, 2008: 136). Thus, this work attempts responding to a number of questions related to the propellants of student strikes, the mechanisms or modes employed to express them and the superseding fallouts of the manifestations. This reflection requires, in a synthetic way, the careful analysis of information gathered from various sources.

I. Propellants of Strike Actions on Campuses

The factors that ignited the fury of the students on the campuses are varied and range from socio-economic to political considerations. The flames of the revolutionary tendencies had to take an excruciating dimension with the malaise related to the growing population in some higher institutions, especially at the University of Yaounde which was the only university in Cameroon before 1993.

Between 1970 and 2016, data collected from Cameroon state universities identify two major economic factors that "stem from the reduction in resources allocated to university management and the student-specific unemployment environment" (Bodo, 2008: 50). The budget allocated to education was poorly managed and at times with great difficulty so much so that the coverage of the needs for the smooth functioning of the system became difficult to attain. Added to this, the students suffered the austerity of the economic malaise that plagued the country as a result of the economic crisis that became visible in the mid-1980s leading to the breakdown of the "welfare state" (Makosso, 2006: 77). The situation added to the dysfunction that resulted in the observed disorders (Manji, 2011: 1). This fueled fraudulent registration, the traffic of notes; lessons poorly delivered, poorly equipped and poorly maintained laboratories and the lack of innovation. Added to the list of these defects were corruption, the laxity of some university authorities, the insufficiency of some lecturers, the politicization of Higher Education, the depredation of morals, the promotion of violence, incompetence and mediocrity (Ngandjeu, 1985:43; Hermet, 1993:13). In such a socio-economic context powered by increased youth unemployment, the

situation could only be explosive. Besides these classic variables, students demanded better treatment in terms of scholarships, living conditions, accommodation and catering (National Institute of Statistics - NIS, 2007: 55, 2008: 99).

The poor orientation of financial assistance allocated to the students and the subsequent suspension of grants to them by the state due to the economic crisis were all factors that contributed to the elevation of the students' expenses. The piercing poverty and expensive living conditions made campus life a discomfort to many students (Makosso, 2006: 77). In the chain of existing problems, there were others such as untimely cuts of water and electricity in student neighborhoods. This unpleasant atmosphere contributed to the expansion of the risk of campus troubles (Woudamiké, 2008: 144).

The abandonment of the student community opened the way to the emergence of various forms of conflicts. The reflection of the political situation caused "unemployed graduates to feel refractory to politics." This atmosphere denoted the sad realities that prevailed in the academic institutions of Cameroon. The students were not imbued with the meanders of the management of institutions, they pointed a finger at the system of administration accusing it of being responsible for their frustrations.

Since the mid-1980s, the recruitment policy in the public service has suffered from the austere realities of the economic crisis. This was reflected in the state's inability to employ enough lecturers in Higher Education and other sectors in the country. For example, during the 1990/91 academic year the teacher-student ratio stood at 1:132 in the Faculty of Law and Economics in the University of Yaounde at Ngoa-Ekellé while the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences had a ratio of 1:58 (Tchomga, Kuete and Schamp, 2009: 3). The advent of the crisis nullified, to a certain extent, the efforts of the academic and political authorities in regulating the day to day running of Higher Education institutions in the country as a large number of students struggled to get used to or benefit from administrative services.

In this deleterious academic climate, the University of Yaounde saw a rapid growth in the student population, raising the problem of the proportionality ratio between infrastructure and the number of students. For instance, the student population had risen from 4,484 in 1973 to about 43,755 in 1993 (MINESUP, 2014: 18). The infrastructure initially meant for 5000 students, was hardly improved upon to permit effective teaching to be carried out in the amphitheatres.

Another sad reality of the ethical problem was the nature of student-academic authority relationship. Blocking students from advancing or progressing in their academic undertakings remained a call for concern (Maïla, 2017: 49). Some lecturers were accused "by their former students as being the cause of their reseating certain courses or their outright failure. Girls are the

first victims of this form of pressure in cases of sexual harassment." Meanwhile, boys sometimes gained "from their grades having a relationship with a girl coveted by a [male] lecturer. Ethnic networks have sometimes governed the functioning of evaluation practices" (Tchomga, Kuete and Schamp, 2009: 15). Such an environment gave rise to latent rivalries that later ended up turning into many targeted conflicts, which were always a source of students' discontent.

In addition, the students rejected the quality of the lessons and the unfulfilled hourly volumes. At times, the academic year was disrupted by public disorders and the transmission of knowledge was compromised. All these plunged the students into uncertainty as the insurrectional irredentism that surfaced in irregular times were only the surplus of a way of life that placed them in a world of painful conditions.

For a long time, the University of Yaounde witnessed relatively few protests. This was because the students were few and they enjoyed several privileges such as monthly bursaries from the state, free feeding and job guarantee at the end of their courses. By 1990, it became evident that the worsening conditions would create an atmosphere of frustration that would lead to sporadic disorders in and out of campus. Meanwhile, the situation became volatile as the political liberalism process would split the students into factions. Konings (2011:209-213) contends that the students were divided on ethnic lines with the Beti students rallying behind the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) while the Anglophone-Bamileke group stood behind the Social Democratic Front (SDF), an alternative political party led by Ni John Fru Ndi. Soon, the "autochthony discourse and ethnic exclusion" would come to adorn life on campus. The political debates between the opposition and the government impacted seriously on the thoughts and actions of the students.

Over time, the students organized themselves into groups which they wanted to use as instruments of self-expression. Rapidly, the National Coordination of Cameroon Students (also known as Students' Parliament or simply Parliament) emerged on the university campus. The members presented themselves as revolutionaries and then transformed it into a tool of strike actions and other acts of vandalism whenever the university authorities failed to meet their demands. Alternatively, the regime called for the creation of the Committee for Self Defense hoping to use it as a deterrent for the actions of the Students' Parliament (Konings, 2011:213-214). The emergence of the two camps became an untouchable time bomb which needed just a spark to set an already incendiary situation ablaze. The inevitable explosion, as seen in part two of the work, would lead the government to engage certain reforms in the education sector with the hope of addressing the worries of the students.

In 1993 the Head of State, Paul Biya, decided to decongest the University of Yaounde by initiating the Higher Education Reforms which led to the creation of more university institutions

in the country with the intension of containing the growing student population (Boahen et al., 1993: 81). This was made possible by Presidential Decree No. 93/026 of 19 January 1993, which created five new universities in the higher education arena in Cameroon. Thus, the University Centre Annex of Buea which hosted only the National Advanced School of Translation and Interpretation (ASTI) became a full-fledged university. There was also the emergence of the universities of Yaounde II at Sao, Ngaoundere, Douala and Dschang. Between 2008 and 2010 two more universities were added. These were the universities of Maroua (created by Decree No. 2008/208 of 9 August 2008) and Bamenda (created by Decree No. 2010/371 of 14 December 2010) respectively. These brought the number of state universities to eight by 2010. These reforms did not mean that the problems that plagued the lone University of Yaounde before now were going to be obliterated, even in the others, with a magic wand.

Several years after the Higher Education Reform, living and study conditions in the various state institutions of higher learning have equally experienced nearly all of the problems that plagued the lone University of Yaounde at the time. Students were at times purported to have completed higher education without imbibing the capacities that their training was meant to offer. With regards to the University of Buea, Nyamjoh (2012:98, 100) argues that holistic research was hardly evident. Some of the science students were said to have finished their studies without even knowing how to pipette nor use the centrifuge. Such inadequacies contributed to the students' strike action of 1995 which led to the ban of the University of Buea Students' Union (UBSU).

It was due to recurrent problems that bedeviled various state universities in Cameroon that Joseph Woudamiké, one-time student strike leader at the University of Ngaoundere and now a university professor, argues that the students of the various state universities fell back into the same realities of the University of Yaounde. He further contends that the immaturity of the new university institutions and the relocation of the problems of the University of Yaounde to the new institutions could be used to explain why students in the University of Ngaoundere staged a number of strike actions in 1999 and 2002 (Woudamiké, 2008:135-136).

The strategy of institutional decongestion was not without consequences. It potentially involved, with it all the difficulties of the University of Yaounde and even created new infrastructural and other problems that the state could have hardly predicted or imagined. For instance, Jua and Nyamjoh (2012:30), maintain that at its creation, the University of Buea inherited the library of ASTI with a specialized collection (mostly for translation studies) meant for only 70 students. Given that Cameroon was tied down to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), the government could not attract funds from the World Bank to immediately construct new infrastructures. In 1998, however, a new library was built with funds from the French Co-

operation. Besides trying to use the government of Cameroon as a Trojan horse, the French went ahead to dump outdated books in it.

When the students of Yaounde I started a peaceful strike on 27 April 2005, those of other state universities aligned with it because the problems they faced were virtually the same. The students demanded an end to the annual tuition fees of 50.000 FCFA, a reduction of school bureaucracy, better conditions of education, more lecture halls, the installation of speakers in amphitheatres, among other demands. Nanfosso (2006: 103-104), summarizes the main problems of campuses of public universities in Cameroon in two points. Firstly, there was a deep deterioration of the conditions of supervision in public universities, both in terms of lecturer-student ratio as reception structures. Secondly, the difficulties of financing young people by less and less well-off parents created a latent tension that could explode in the event of incomprehension with the public authority.

Apart from the disapproval of tuition fees, some student disorders were provoked by other but not unrelated fiscal concerns. There were times that commotion crawled into campuses because of the irregularities that characterized the annual Academic Excellent Grant of 50,000 FCFA awarded to outstanding students by the President of the Republic. At times, students who did not find their names on lists published by the university authorities complained bitterly especially if they felt qualified. At times, they decided to stage a showdown against the authorities as was the case with some students of the Higher Teachers Training College – HTTC (*Ecole Normale Supérieure* – ENS) Maroua on 15 November 2015. Besides, most of the university students periodically condemned some of the numerous fees and penalties that were imposed on them in exchange for services on campus. Some of these included library charges, charges for the collection of transcripts and fees for tutorials. For example, on 28 November 2016, over 700 students of the University of Buea went on strike in condemnation of the penalty of 10,000 FCFA imposed on them for late registration on the designed electronic platform (CONTRA NOCENDI Cameroon, 2016:2) and the non-payment of presidential grants (Cameroon Concord, 2016: 1).

In addition, the lack of adequate infrastructure for monitoring students did not facilitate in any case the conduct of practical sessions of the courses in due time. The chronic delay, the lack of laboratories, the insufficiency of the structures of documentation, the absence of the logistics for research did not favour supervision in the Higher Education. The disproportionate nature between the number of students and houses led to the increase of the cost of the rooms in some university vicinities, causing the overbidding (Woudamiké, 2008: 139; Bodo, 2008: 71-74). In view of this analysis, the frustrations in Cameroon's state universities arose in a variety of contexts involving socio-economic, political and institutional frameworks. The discontentment of the students was expressed through various modes.

II. Gesticulation and Modes of the Expression of Discontent

In Cameroon, student strikes took various forms over the years. While there were scenes of violence in-between the years, they were yet other instances where mechanisms of the non-violence were employed in the course of manifesting their discontent in and out of campus. Here, an overview is made on the various forms of expression of the students' claims which fall in the broad register of the strategies imbedded in the strikes and the binding forces that led to the mutation of said forms.

1. The Option of Violence in Student Strike Actions

From a historical perspective, the strike phenomenon has always existed in higher education institutions in various parts of the world and as such, higher institution campuses in Cameroon have not been spared either. There were sporadic strike actions in university and other related educational structures with uncontrolled forms and untold consequences. According to Hermet (1993: 47) and Woudamiké (2008: 136) campus strikes usually began with the boycott of classes and then extended to the erection of barricades outside campuses leading to the occupation of public space. Mokam (2005: 64), Nkwengue (2006: 34) and Polère (2007: 1-2) argue that road barricades, the requisition of wealth, and sabotage were all prove that civil disobedience and vandalism had an ambient face, a chaotic mess in a pile that ended with a huge loss of public infrastructures. With all the daunting problems, the students were forced to express their disgruntlement by various ways on campus and/or off campus especially through strike actions.

Between 1990 and 1996, a number of violent confrontations between Parliament and the Committee for Self Defense hampered the peace that reigned on the campus of the Yaounde University I at Ngoa-Ekelle. In 1990 the students suffered a reduction of 10,000 FCFA from the usual scholarship money paid to them as frustration was already mounting following the difficulties that accompanied the overcrowded lecture halls. The failure of several calls on the Minister of Higher Education to address these issues led them to mount blocks on the campus and many students began boycotting classes (Konings, 2011: 216-217).

In April 1991 Parliament led by Benjamin Senfo Tonkam (of Bamileke origin) openly aligned with the SDF politics and marched calling for a Sovereign National Conference in support of the opposition parties. As the students demonstrated on campus, gendarmerie forces were brought in to disperse them at the request of the university authorities so as to protect the university property. The forces of law and order carried out an onslaught on campus as well as in student residential areas using tear gas. In the process, it was alleged that the forces went out looting and raping female students. The Parliament "commandos" responded to what they considered as military brutality by throwing stones, burning cars and destroying glass windows on campus. In

the course of acting, the students chanted songs like “Today may be the last day we don’t know...” to help keep the tempo of their resistance. Parliament, however, stopped their activities on campus by 19 April 1991 and the troops withdrew from campus. On 21 April 1991 Tonkam, who was in hiding at the US embassy was escorted to campus by US marines where he called for Operation Ghost Campus (Konings, 2011:217-219).

On 4 May 1991 Parliament organized a meeting on campus with the approval of the Chancellor. During the meeting attended by over 25,000 students, Parliament called for solidarity as it reviewed the students’ grievances. It however, maintained its demand for a Sovereign National Conference. Unfortunately, disagreement between Parliament and the Self Defense Group led to clashes between them. Once more, soldiers were forced to invade student quarters in Bonamoussadi as it was alleged that they looted property and raped a number of girls. In the process, about 218 students were arrested. However, there were contradictory reports on the number of deaths registered. While the private press argued that several students were killed, government sources were less precise on this. For example, Augustine Konchou Kouomegni, Minister of Information and Culture and government’s spokesman claimed that there was *zero mort* meaning no deaths were registered. On 15 May 1991 President Paul Biya decided to put an end to the bewildering situation when he appointed a nine-man committee led by retired Chief Justice S.M.L. Endeley to prop into the crisis. The committee blamed the students, the university administration and the forces of law and order for what happened. Meanwhile, the government announced that more universities would be created. Furthermore, Joel Moulen, the Chancellor of the university, was dismissed and Peter Agbor Tabi was appointed to replace him. (Konings, 2011:219-221).

In 1993, the creation of new universities saw the introduction of the payment of tuition fees in the various state institutions. Given that such a reform came at the time when the economic crisis was at its height and when there was untold suffering, the university students were bound to resist. In Yaounde, the students led a strike action calling for the annulment of the decision. Other universities embraced the strike for the similar reasons. Konings (2009:217-218) intimates that in Buea, the University of Buea Students Union (UBSU) organized a strike action with the intention of upholding the students’ interests. The University authorities led by Dr Dorothy Limunga Njeuma took a number of punitive measures against the striking students. For instance, students and their sponsors were compelled to sign an undertaking that they would be law abiding with a promise not to cause further disorders. In addition, the student leaders like Ebenezer Akwanga, were dismissed from the university and steps were taken to block them from gaining admission into other state universities in the country. By 1995, the activities of UBSU had been suspended on campus (Konings, 2009:217-218).

On 20th April 2005, hundreds of students of the University of Yaounde I took to the streets and blocked the roads in Ngao Ekelle thereby causing serious traffic commotion in the town. They carried placards which condemned what they termed “illegal fees” to add to the statutory tuition fee of 50,000 FCFA. For example, they wanted an end to the 25 FCFA they paid as access fee to the library, the 2,000 FCFA they paid for tutorials, and other charges attached to the collection of transcripts (Atatar and Nsom (2005:1). The heat of this strike touched other universities which shared a similar fate. For example, though the University of Buea was to operate on an Anglo-Saxon platform it was not free from some of the daunting problems facing other universities. (Konings, 2009:216). In the case of the University of Yaounde where the strike action began, Atatar and Nsom (2005:1) maintain that:

The students appeared very disciplined and orderly in their strike action but the presence of police and gendarme officers caused some anxiety. In some cases, there were hot verbal exchanges between the students and the forces of law and order. Students chanted Anne Marie Nzie’s popular music track, “Liberte” even as police commissioner tried to persuade them to allow traffic to flow.

That notwithstanding, it could be argued that the throwing of barricades on the roads and halting traffic is a violent approach as opposed to peaceful strike actions such as sit-down strikes which are hardly taken to public space. Were it not for the calm nature of the forces of law and order, it would have exploded into untold armed confrontation. It is important to note that as the demonstration moved to the public space, there were some students who limited themselves to a hunger strike on campus. The hunger strike dimension elaborated under new forms of expressing students’ temperaments, attests to the contrasting claim that the mounting of road blocks could be veritable form of violence in public space. About a year later, the students of the University of Yaounde I would be on the rampage again and as usual, it would affect other universities.

On 27 April 2006 the University of Yaounde I started another strike action which other universities joined in a show of sympathy while using it as an opportunity to expose their own grievances which were similar to those of their peers as already discussed. What began as a peaceful strike action suddenly turned violent. For example, the University of Buea Students' Union (UBSU) led the students to erect barricades and to burn car tyres on the main road at the University Junction in Molyko, Buea, in order to interrupt traffic and to arouse public attention to their course (see photograph 1). The Registrar, Dr Herbert Nganjo Endeley, tried to calm down the students to no avail. The police attempted to disperse the striking students with teargas and water cannons but were pelted by stones and pebbles in retaliation. The students went into the rampage destroying vehicles and properties along the main road outside the campus. In the course of the imbroglio, two students were said to have been shot to death while a third was mortally injured. The victims were Embwam Aloysius, a level 400 student of the Department of

Environmental Sciences and Gilbert Nforlem, a Masters student of the Department of Geology. In all, a delegation of five students who travelled from the University of Yaounde I to the University of Buea were accused of haven instigated the violence (<https://en.wikinews.org>: 1).

Photograph 1. Burning Car Tyres at UB Junction, Buea in April 2006



Source: ADDEC Photo Service, Yaounde, Consulted on 25 November 2023.

Acts of violence by students continued over the years. In 2013, for example, the students of the Higher Teachers' Training College, under the tutelage of the University of Bamenda, orchestrated acts of vandalism outside their campus in protest against poor campus conditions as enumerated earlier in this discourse. The students blocked the road between the towns of Bamenda and Ndop with stones, mobile phone kiosks and other materials which they could lay hands on along the road causing enormous damage in the process (see photograph 2). As such, the first cases of violence on the campuses of the University of Yaoundé I and II, Buea, Douala and Ngaoundere identified with this classic form of protest. The destruction of public property and services and the undermining of the moral integrity of certain academic authorities attest to the waves of uncontrollable violence that animated the demonstrations. Some scholars attribute the use of military or police force on striking students in higher institutions as a weapon to nib their threat to political authority in the society. Banégas (1993: 209) contends that public demonstrations allowed the political forces to legitimize violence and use it to give force to the law in order to clean the hotbeds of contestation posing a threat to the balance of power and peace. This culminated in the obvious desire not to grant students a legal framework for the expression of the right to strike.

Photograph 2. Road Block by Students of Bambili in 2013



Source: ADDEC photo service, Yaounde, Consulted on 25 November 2023.

Meanwhile, another strike action that took a violent twist was that staged by the students of the University of Buea on 28 November 2016 which engulfed about a month due to a number of factors already highlighted in the first part of this paper. Over 700 students, came out against “actions of the administration that increased effective cost of attendance that [they found] unreasonably detrimental to them” leading to the arrest of several of their peers. The strike followed the protest of lawyers that rocked the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon against the purported assimilation of the common law system by the state. (CONTRA NOCENDI Cameroon, 2016:2).

According to Cameroon Concord (2016: 1-2), the students gathered in front of the Central Administration to denounce the payment of the payment of 10,000 FCFA as late entry for registration and the non-payment of presidential grants to them. The outburst appeared to be spontaneous or instinctive as no student strike leader could be clearly identified. This was followed by a heavy deployment of security forces on campus. The OBSERVERS (2016;1), an online journal, posits that “the police charged at students with batons.” In a confrontation that ensued, several students were beaten and some arrested. Tear gas brooded the air and some of the students escaped to the student quarters amidst the tensed atmosphere. This was the scenario for several weeks before the situation was brought under control.

2. State Response and Mutations of the Procedures of Student Disputes

i. The Authorities and the Drive for Change

It is a question of examining, in this part, the reactions of the university and/or state authorities that conditioned the change in forms of expression of student strikes and the repertoire of new

ways of participating in the strike in and out of campus. According to Ngniman (1993: 15, 25) and Mvondo (2004: 35, 60, 77, 89), the constraints that led to the changes in the nature of the protests and actions of striking students could be attributed to the manner in which state authorities responded to them. For the most part, the authorities acted on the premise that “violence begets violence” by using the police, gendarmes and other forces of repression as instruments of peace against students’ militancy. Several confrontations between students and the forces of law and order led to the arrest of several striking students as was the case in 1993 and some manhandled in the process (see photograph 3).

Photograph 3. Student being Dragged by the Police in Yaounde in 1993



Source: Album of the ADDEC, Yaounde, Consulted on 25 November 2023.

Although in 1990 there was the return to multiparty democracy and greater freedom of expression in Cameroon, Ngniman (1993: 12) and (Pommerolle, 2007: 17) argue that the laws that imposed themselves on the realities of protest became increasingly severe. Students were monitored through legal channels that promoted measures against uprisings. Posting claims would have served as a pretext for violent repression for "incitement to revolt" or "breach of public order." According to Pommerolle (2007: 39), by a clear desire to break with this traditional form of strike, the political order legitimized the use of violent reprisal of students’ and other mobilizations. The case shown in photograph 3 is suggestive of the brutality experienced by the daring protesters or students.

Another strategy that was espoused to bring student militancy in check was the censorship or outright embargo on the functioning of student associations on campus. If in Cameroon the authorities hesitated to approve student associations, it is because in some African countries too

these movements constitute a breeding ground for future political leaders which needed to be tightly controlled (Maïla, 2017: 95-96). There is great fear in seeing the flowering appropriate frameworks that could lead to the emergence of a potential opposition, hence, the introduction of slogans such as "the university outside the political field" and "school for scholars and politics for politicians" propagated by the political authorities from 1990.

To further depict the desire by the authorities to clip the wings of the students on campus, the existence of associations that go with the spirit of opposition to the status quo are brought to book or under check. Bella (2010: 598) posits that academic authorities often work hard to set up guidelines on campuses aimed at neutralizing pockets of trouble. Injunctions, known under the umbrella of university franchises, stifle the flourishing of student movements. That it is, the Parliament, the University of Buea Students' Union (UBSU), the Senate, ADDEC, FRONALICE and MUSEC were all banned from carrying out activities or manifesting on various campuses of higher institutions in Cameroon.

In addition, the authorities also took the disposition to ensure that there were law enforcement officers on campus especially during moments of tension. These officers worked hand in glove with the security men that were permanently recruited on various campuses as part of the support staff of these institutions. They were often seen in strategic places such as the entrance to campus keeping watch. In the University of Douala, for example, policemen were placed at the entrance of the university to control circulation into and out of campus as well as keeping an eye on the movement and temperaments of the student community. This partly served as a deterrent to those who wanted to cause trouble around the institution at any given time. Since prevention was the best control strategy, university authorities took similar actions to repel and even extinguish potential cases of threats to campus order

(https://www.cameroun24.net/images/news/universite_douala670).

ii. New Forms of Expression in Student Strike Temperaments

Student engagement in acts of vandalism gradually came to incorporate other harmless modes of expressing their grievances on campus. The awareness is linked to the evolution of the political context imposed by the repressive response from the forces of law and order during student disorders. The dynamics of Cameroon student movements which, from 1973 to 2006, used projectiles, shifted to a new protesting landscape. Apart from some violent reactions related to the University of Buea, the militant behaviour and actions of students took a new twist in the presentation of their grievances. This pattern openly implies "the passage from violent, morbid, irrational collective behavior to organized, rational, peaceful and civilized demonstrations (Sindjoun, 1996: 4, Morillas, 2010: 88-90, and Morella, 2014: 216). At the same time, it is changing a lot in the dynamics of relations between students and authorities. With its slogan of

non-violence, the Cameroon Students' Rights Association, better known by its French acronym as ADDEC, tried to build a positive image of the students and to add meaning and authenticity to the expression of their complaints in front of the political elite. The commitment of students under the guise of the ADDEC, organized around citizen values, put a special emphasis on harmless defense as a force of operation. Protesters, in order to avoid clashes with the police, engaged a strategy of peaceful mobilization. Among other things, we identified the sit-in strike and peaceful/non-violent marches, as was the case of Yaounde I in 2006, to buttress this point (see planch 4 A and B).

Planch 4. (A) Sit-in and (B) Non-violent March in the University of Yaounde I in 2006

A



B



Sources: A: <http://addec.unblog.fr/2006/12/28/19>, Consulted on 22 November 2023 and B: ADDEC Photo Service, Yaounde, Consulted on 25 November 2023.

Student strikes as a whole are shifting from violence to more sophisticated construction to circumvent possible government repressive traps. For instance, the hunger strike has become another effective means by which individuals or groups could use in communicating and attracting attention to their desired goals (Sindjoun, 1996: 27). In 2003, a student of the University of Yaounde I employed the hunger strike using a non-violent placard to protest against his suspension by the university authorities (see planch 5 A and B, *Greve de la Faim* is a French expression for "Hunger Strike"). In 2005, about half a dozen students affiliated to the Cameroons Students' Rights Association, ADDEC, had taken up a hunger strike in front of the main administrative building. Among them were Robison Mouafo Djontou, Karl Koiza, Ibrahim Mohammed, Gabriel Kuegne and Linjoum Mbowou who laid on scraps of cartons on the floor

refusing food and water. In fact, they had made this area their abbot after attempts to use this strategy failed at Mvolye as they were allegedly driven by the Archbishop of Yaounde while they faced the same fade at the National Commission of Human Rights. Though they looked frail, they stayed on following the encouragement of other sympathizing students. The students claimed that the authorities tried to corrupt them and when they refused, they were ignored (Atatar and Nsom, 2005:1).

Planch 5. A Student on Hunger Strike on the Campus of the University of Yaounde I in 2013



Source: ADDEC Photo Service, Yaounde, Consulted on 25 November 2023.

Moreover, the students' imagination is also reflected in this inventive capacity including the art and use of social networks as an effective means of expression and propaganda. In such cases, for example, they engage the drafting of petitions containing their grievances which are submitted to the authorities concerned for reaction. The ability to create and act by students is reinforced by developing proposals for improving their well-being (Morillas: 89). Such an act may be accompanied by the picket line mood of protest. On 15 November 2015, for example, some students of Higher Teachers' Training College of the University of Maroua gathered in front of the Rectorate in protest against the absence of their names on the list of the "Excellent Grant" of 50.000frs allocated for best-performing students in state run higher institutions by President Paul Biya (see photograph 6). While avoiding acts of vandalism, they expected to be quickly heard. By such method, striking students were less exposed to the risk of repression by the forces of law and order especially when a compromise was quickly arrived at.

Photograph 6. Students Protesting the Absence of their Names on the List of Presidential Grants at the Rectorate, University of Maroua, in November 2015



Source: Photo Provided by Ahmadou Bouba, Maroua, 17 December 2023.

Internally, the ADDEC participated in strengthening the awareness of students by encouraging them to read texts of laws and books governing their lives and those that touch on their patriotic feelings as Cameroonians. Thus, the members of the ADDEC were inspired by great figures of non-violent movements and historical leaders of protest movements. The call of the ADDEC required students of public universities to be on permanent contact and to maintain a common front in order to present a string of valid claims whenever the need arose. As such, it reaffirmed the call for collective action and a constant commitment whose mechanisms were in perpetual reinvention (Luxen, 2008:2). Clearly, a line of rupture emerged in the ideology and expression related to disputes on university campuses. The students, settling in front of the offices of the concerned officials (as already seen in photograph 6), managed to get the authorities to listen to them quickly and to find solutions to their quandaries. These means of direct but non-violent pressure, challenged the authorities on the claims and the effects were at times immediate so to speak.

The factors that gave rise to student strikes and the constraints which forced them to break with the register of violence were all parameters that contributed to the strategic modification of the operations of the ADDEC in April 2004. It opted for a more refined and more conscious strategy, which marked a revolution in the arena of student strikes. All the forces of students' struggle made the hunger strike the most updated form of mobilization.

3. EXTRAPOLATIONS OF STUDENT STRIKES

In this part of the paper, we intend to shade light on some of the consequences of the student strikes. It discusses the implications on the student militant actions on the university landscape in Cameroon. For certain reasons, the so-called radicalism of students piped down a bit as new forms of less aggressive methods of protests and strikes emerged. In addition, the public authorities, besides cracking down on the students all the time, took certain actions which paid off even if they were not enduring solutions to the student-university administration imbroglio.

i. Implications for the University Landscape

The ADDEC, in later years, engaged the reorientation and the configuration of the landscape of the disputes and managed to attract the sympathy of the leaders. Radical speeches and scenes of violence were gradually replaced by a subtlety in the programme of deployment of student claims. During the period 1973 to 1989, students struggled to bring palpable returns following their outbursts. Marginal cases of achievements such as the improvement of reception facilities, the equipment of libraries and laboratories were realized at the University of Yaounde.

The reforms of January 1993 were the fallout of the students' commitment to break with the unhealthy framework that housed overcrowded amphitheaters observed in the 1980s and early 1990s. It was from the ashes of student unrests in Yaounde that the universities of Buea, Douala, Dschang, Ngaoundere and Yaounde II emerged. The strike actions had thus, favoured the decentralization of university institutions to peripheral areas. The reforms therefore, carried with them the seeds of the resolution of an uneasiness that shuddered the lives of the university students for several years.

Since 2007, the program of the modernization and professionalization of teaching undertaken in the various universities of the world coincided with the authorities' willingness to meet the demands of students in the face of rising unemployment. Authorities aiming to reduce the unemployment rate decided to bring in new innovations which included the *License-Master-Doctoral* (LMD) system following the difficulties encountered by students, especially to find jobs, after their training (Michaela, 2014: 36).

This change of objective was therefore the result of the student activism of the 1980s with an unemployment rate which according to the National Employment Fund stood at 97 per cent. Moreover, the university map continued to grow with the diversification of training. The period 2009 and 2015 was mainly marked by the creation of additional higher education institutions and the construction of new infrastructures (Michaela, 2014: 44). In the University of Douala, for example, the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences benefited from the construction of two new central buildings (MINJUSTICE, 2015: 135).

The university of Buea benefitted from a number of infrastructures as well. For example, the Faculty of Health Science was provided with a pedagogic block, a library block and specialized rooms. The Higher Teachers Training College of the University of Bamenda, benefitted from the construction and equipment of three pedagogic blocks, a university residence, a university restaurant and a laboratory. At the University of Dschang, the construction of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FASA) was completed. The universities of Yaounde I and II witnessed a number of rehabilitations works. Besides, there was the construction of ten new laboratories in total (Ibid.:135). The "Francophone Digital Campus" that was constructed by a Cameroonian economic operator dealing with student residents, was retroceded to the University of Yaoundé II. This fitted into the new impetus that gradually gathered steam in the propagation of professionalization of teaching between 2014 and 2015.

At the University of Ngaoundere, the first phase of the construction work of the Administrative Building of the University Institute of Technology (IUT) was completed while at the Fotso Victor Institute, the first phase of construction of a pedagogical block at the IUT was also realized (MINJUSTICE, 2010: 146-147). At the University of Maroua which hosted only the Higher Teachers' Training College and the Higher Institute of the Sahel until 2014, a number of faculties and professional schools were created. There were four faculties which included the Faculty of Economics and Management, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Legal and Political Science and the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences. Meanwhile the specialized schools that were added included the Higher National Polytechnic (former Higher Institute of the Sahel) and the School of Mines and Petroleum Industries in Kaele (<http://www.univ.maroua.cm>).

ii. The Authorities and Student Support

The efforts of the public authorities took into account the improvement of the living conditions of the students as several actions were taken in this direction. A number of scholarships and other forms of assistance were granted to students to reduce their financial burden. In 2014 and 2015, for example, about 400 students gained scholarships to study or undergo training in 12 countries. In addition, about 100,000 students from state universities and IPES benefited from the academic excellence bonus of 50,000 FCFA offered by the President of the Republic (Michaela, 2014: 10, 29; Maïla, 2017: 129). Attempts were also made to provide an all-inclusive environment for students with physical challenges on university campuses. Following circular No. 08/0006 / LCCC / MINESUP / MINAS of 09 July 2008 signed by the Minister of Higher Education, emphasis was made on the improvement of the conditions of reception and supervision of disabled or vulnerable students in state universities and other higher institutions of learning. As part of its application, a Division of Social Affairs was established in various universities and institutions. In the University of Buea, for example, it negotiated for the allocation of rooms to some physically impaired students in the school hostel on preferential

terms (Michaela, 2014: 61). Besides the special aid granted to disabled students, several universities gradually took their interests into consideration in the layout and construction of classrooms, amphitheatres and pathways. These included the facilitation of the movement of those using tricycles on campus (See photograph 7).

Photograph 7. Pathway for Physically Challenged Students to a Lecture Halls, University of Maroua



Source: Snapped by Damian Akara, Kongola Campus, 19 November 2024.

Conclusion

The engagement of students in strike actions on school campuses derives its *raison d'être* from the combination of several factors supported by a context of socio-economic and political underpinnings. The failure of a number of management policies in higher education were obviously the main signal of their discontent. There was the inadequacy of the reception infrastructures coupled with the economic crisis which made life expensive in the student residential quarters. The vertiginous increase of the student population, rendered an already bad situation worse. The 1993 reforms which led to the decongestion of the university of Yaounde were a welcome relief whose euphoria was unfortunately nabbed in the bud for two main reasons. Firstly, the reforms did not produce the expected results as earlier discussed. Secondly, the decongestion of the university favoured the proliferation and amplification of student strikes on the campuses of higher institutions in Cameroon thereby widening their scope in lips and bounds. In order to express their discontentment, the students adopted two fundamental strategies

over time. The students espoused civil disobedience with violence as a means of deployment especially between 1973 and 2003 and then more of non-violence from 2004 to 2015 with some isolated cases of recourse to violence. The pressure that students mounted on the public authorities, either through violence or by peaceful means, produced real effects that gradually improved living conditions on campuses even if more was still required of the authorities.

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