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## CHAPTER 6

# REVISITING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BUEA, CAMEROON: 2004–2013

*Samuel N Fongwa and Godlove N Chifon*

### **Background and introduction**

Research on student participation in university governance, especially in Africa, continues to gain currency in the higher education landscape. Either as members of a scholarly community, or as clients, or to ensure democratic representation, the inclusion of students in university governance has been discussed by scholars in terms of various theoretical arguments. However, the inclusion of students in university governance is not as straightforward as sometimes argued due to a number of inherent challenges in democratic governance as well as contextual challenges within countries and institutions of higher education. Especially in African countries, student participation in university governance has most often faced numerous challenges leading rather to student activism than to actual democratic engagement and representation.

At the case of the University of Buea (UB), Cameroon, this chapter analyses the process of student participation in university governance during the last ten years. It uses a blend of secondary and primary data to explore how student participation in university governance at the UB has unfolded. Primary data collected support in many ways previous research which proposes that student participation in university governance at the UB is either non-existent or entangled in a mix of broader socio-political issues such as ethno-regional and political factionalism. Using interviews with former and current student leaders and university administrators, it can be argued that student participation continues to be blurred by other internal and external stakeholders.

In its first part, the chapter provides a broad overview of higher education governance and student politics during the early years of higher education in Cameroon. The next section focuses on a review of previous research on student activism at the University of Buea. The third section provides a ten-year review of student participation in the UB, from 2004 to 2013. It analyses the transition from a central student body to the current form of student representation and its implications for student representation in university governance at the UB. The last section provides a summing up discussion and conclusion, pulling out lessons learnt from the last decade of participatory governance between students and institutional leadership.

## **Student politics in the earlier years of higher education in Africa**

African students and student movements have played an important role in the struggle for African independence, both in the universities located in the metropolitan countries as well as in the colonial territories (Adams et al. 1991, Bundy 1989, Luescher & Mugume 2014). Post-independence, the provision of higher education on the African continent expanded rapidly in keeping with the promise that the new African universities would contribute significantly to national development (Sawyer 2004; Yesufu 1973). University students were part of a privileged and transitory social group following independence, and played a core role in providing the work force in top-government positions of the newly independent states. In most African countries, students, during this era, lived in affluence and had access to adequate academic facilities, with financial support from governments in the form of generous monthly stipends and comfortably subsidised university accommodation (Zeilig 2008).

However, this good life was not very long lived as most African economies came under severe strain resulting in financial difficulties of the state to maintain its higher education budget. At the same time, there were rising costs related to the expanded provision for social needs in basic health and education and increasing enrolments in higher education while World Bank research provided the justification for requesting African governments to shrink investment in higher education, which was considered more of a luxury than a need in developing countries (Brock-Utne 2000; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos 2002). Some countries responded to these demands by cutting student scholarships and instituting different forms of cost-sharing, such as student tuition and registration fees (Wangenge-Ouma 2008, 2012).

Seeing their status as a privileged group collapse, there was an unprecedented 'convergence of forces' between students and the popular classes (Seddon 2002). Clashes between students and governments over Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) started in the mid-to-late 1980s, and spread with severity across the African continent. Countries that experienced the most recorded incidents of student protests between 1985 and 1995 were Nigeria, Kenya, Sudan, Benin, Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Tunisia (Luescher & Mugume 2014). In Francophone Africa, including Cameroon, student activism against SAPs escalated particularly after the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 (Federici 2000; Luescher & Mugume 2014).

Students inadvertently turned universities into sites of struggle against economic hardship and political and economic mismanagement, while also reaching out and aligning themselves with other civil organisations such as trade unions and women's groups, in their demands for better life and transparent democracy (Badat 1999; Munene 2003). Student participation in university governance as pointed out by Luescher and Mugume (2014) became more of activism than a mutual dialogue for democratic governance.

In the case of Cameroon in particular, student politics in the early years of higher education took a different dimension. With the country having only one university at the time – the University of Yaoundé (UniYao) – student activism operated predominantly along politico-ethno-regional lines (Konings 2005). While students at the UniYao shared most of the grievances expressed by their counterparts in other African countries, the manifestation of these grievances soon became the target for external socio-political agendas by various political and social bodies (Nyamnjoh 1999). Although political liberation offered students the opportunity to organise themselves in defence of their interests, it also tended to divide them along ethno-regional lines. This led to an upsurge of tensions between what later became two distinct groups of students. The one group was the 'autochthonous' mainly Beti<sup>1</sup> students who tended to support the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement; the other group were the Anglophone and Bamilike, students from the grassland, and later referred to as 'strangers', who were more inclined to support the major opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). With the University of Yaoundé in Beti territory, Beti students with the support of university and government officials claimed control of student politics in 'their' university and were determined to combat any organisation by 'strangers'. The growing divergence between these two groups of students, fuelled by the regime, ethnic entrepreneurs, and the press, gave rise to an explosion of violence and the emergence of a Beti militia on campus, which was engaged in various forms of ethnic exclusion (Konings 2002).

It was in this context of growing tension on campus and the gradual opening of space for organisations during the broader political liberalisation process of the early 1990s that the National Coordination of Cameroon Students was formed under the leadership of Benjamin Senfo Tonkam. According to Konings (2011: 217), the organisation's first public activity under the leadership of Benjamin Tonkam was 'on 15 August 1990, when it addressed an open letter to the head of state stressing that higher education in Cameroon was sick and without repairs, and characterised by inadequate infrastructure, anachronism and arbitrariness'. It also appealed to the president to reform the university so that it would become a school of tolerance and dialogue and regain its lost credibility (Konings 2002, 2009). In response, the president warned the students to remain aloof from politics, insisting that politics was for politicians and academic institutions for scholars; a slogan that became popular in higher education discourse at the time: '*La politique aux politiciens, l'école aux écoliers*' (Konings 2002: 190).

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1 Beti is the local tribe around the Central Region of Cameroon.

With increasing student enrolments at the only public university at the time, which resulted in huge limits in available teaching and learning facilities, part of the response from the president was to decentralise higher education provision to other provinces. In 1992, five new state universities were created as part of higher education reforms across the higher education landscape (Njeuma et al. 1999). Four of the universities were to be bilingual, namely the UniYao which now became the University of Yaoundé I and the University of Yaoundé II both in the Central Region, the University of Douala in the Littoral Region and the University of Dschang in the West Region. Of the two remaining universities, the University of Ngaoundéré in the North (Adamawa Region) was to be a purely French-speaking institution while the University of Buea (South-West Region) was to be the lone Anglophone institution.

### **The University of Buea in Cameroon**

The University of Buea (UB) conceived in the Anglo-Saxon university tradition started in 1993 with an initial population of approximately 2 048 students. According to the 2007 *Higher Education Statistical Year Book*, the UB student body grew to about 11 866 students by the 2006/2007 academic year (Ministry of Higher Education 2007). The university is composed of six faculties: the Faculties of Arts, Education, Health Sciences, Sciences, Social and Management Sciences and the newly created Faculty of Agricultural and Veterinary Science. Three higher schools of professional training: the Advanced School of Translation and Interpretation, the College of Technology and the recently created Higher Technical Teachers Training College with Campus in a neighbouring town, Kumba also make up the university academic profile.

Created during a period of tough socio-economic conditions such as a dire economic crisis and the start of a multi-party system in Cameroon, as well as the scrapping of student scholarships and the introduction of student fees, the UB administration had the difficult task of steering the new institution through the early stages. Some of the main characteristics of the early years were staff dissatisfaction with conditions of work, students' protests and the need for university officials to align with national politics of the time. Besides a heavy student workload from a fast-increasing student population, lecturers were confronted with financial difficulties characterised by delays in the payment of their salaries, compounded by a drastic 60–70% cut in civil servants' salaries across the country, and worsened by a 50 per cent devaluation of the currency, the CFA, in January 1994 (Konings 2002). Hence the UB started in a much-stressed atmosphere in which parents, students and even staff themselves were going through socio-economic challenges in various ways.

## **Student participation and activism at the UB during the first decade: 1993 to 2003**

Barely three months after the University of Buea became a fully-fledged university, it experienced its first student strike. News had circulated on campus that students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences would pay CFA 150 000 (USD 600 by then), while their counterparts in the Faculty of Sciences would pay CFA 200 000 (USD 800 by then). This angered the students who decided to go on a strike on 20 August 1993 (Fokwang 2009). Students refused to write their exams unless the university administration overturned its plans to increase fees. Students also presented a list of demands to university leadership, which included, inter alia, that they meet with landlords to broker a cap on private student accommodation. However, all of the demands were not met. While the student leaders and the university authorities remained at loggerheads, the minister of higher education intervened and denied the fact that the government had any plans to introduce tuition fees at UB.

At the beginning of the 1995/1996 academic year, the revived University of Buea Student Union (UBSU) effectively went operational. One of its objectives was to open and run a student canteen which provided photocopy services at reduced rates to students, but they would soon get into trouble with the administration over a range of issues, the most critical being the administration's reluctance to give access to student funds. The student union leader accused the university administration of not collaborating with them over the budgetary and constitutional requirements. UBSU submitted a memorandum to the vice-chancellor and registrar on 24 November 1995, enumerating student grievances, inter alia, the administration's reluctance to give union leaders access to the students' union account; the urgent need of funds to run the student canteen for the welfare of students; the university's refusal to grant permission to UBSU to publish its newsletter, *UBSU Time*, and the exclusion of union leaders from the decision-making process in matters affecting students (Fokwang 2009).

The registrar upon receiving the memorandum immediately sealed off the student canteen and requested the student leaders to vacate their offices without further delay. The UBSU president and secretary-general were shortly thereafter served with a letter from the vice-chancellor suspending them indefinitely. The student leaders were suspended – according to the VC – for 'gross indiscipline', disrespect for authorities and inciting of students to engage in protest. They were consequently barred from entering the UB campus and from any services offered by the institution until further notice (Fokwang 2009). The university campus was subsequently turned into a state of turmoil as students came to protest against the dismissal of their leaders. Their goal was the immediate reversal of the VC's decision, failing which they would continue to boycott classes until their demands were met.

A crisis that started timidly as a standoff between students and the university administration soon became violent, with the registrar's car set alight followed by other acts of vandalism by angry students. The strike further degenerated into an ethnic conflict as members of the Bakweri ethnic group who are the autochthonous or the indigenes of Buea, soon began to

attack the ‘strangers’, mostly the North-Westerners from the Bamenda Region, accusing them of being the cause of the unrest (Fokwang 2009). This is in spite of the fact that the UBSU president, Mr Valentine Nti, was a member of an ethnic group in the North-West Province while the vice-president and the secretary-general respectively were from the South-West Province. The strike was, however, interpreted as a rebellion of the North-West students against the Bakweri-dominated authorities of the university administration.

The University of Buea Student Union was ruthlessly abolished after the 1995 strike action with the administration using a hard stance against any form of activism. A new system of student representation was unilaterally imposed on the students and all they could do was to comply with the ‘dictates of the university administration’ (Fokwang 2009: 19). Instead of a common students’ union as is a practice in most universities around the world, the university authorities devised a new system of student government whose power and functions were restricted to individual faculties. Each faculty elected its own executive whose prerogative was limited to the faculty, and as such was unable to speak on behalf of the entire student body. The five faculties of the time constituted what was known as the ‘college of presidents’. While this structure conveyed the idea of the existence of a form of central student government, many students felt that the many faculty student governments were simply ‘toothless bulldogs’ since their powers were extremely limited (Fokwang 2009: 19).

In a nutshell, the autochthony-allochthony conflict in Cameroon as in other parts of Africa has come to represent the claims of indigenous ethnic citizens against domination by so-called ethnic strangers (Geschiera & Nyamnjoh 2000; Bayart et al. 2001). In Cameroon and particularly the Anglophone South-West Region of Cameroon, local elites and politicians have assisted in fuelling these discourses for political gain by depicting their Anglophone counterparts of the North-West Region as ‘dominating and exploitative’ (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). The fact that student politics has been interpreted along prevailing political and regional lines is indicative of the continuous intersection between the constituency of student activism and socio-political development within broader politics (Fokwang 2009).

### **Student participation and activism during the second decade: 2004 to 2013**

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buea, Dr Dorothy Njeuma, succeeded in establishing, to an extent, a measure of control over the university community for a considerable period of time (1995–2003) by effectively using ‘carrot and stick’ methods. Nevertheless, 2005 saw the dawn of a new era as a new University of Buea Student Union was born. The birth of the Union came in the wake of a nationally coordinated university students’ strike action which was called for by the Association for the Defence of the Rights of Cameroonian Students, known by its French acronym as ADDEC (*Association pour la défense de droits des étudiants du Cameroun*). ADDEC initially presented a laundry list of eleven demands to the minister of

higher education which covered all state universities. With the absence of a central student body to coordinate the strike, there was need for some form of coordinated front in engaging in any form of productive dialogue with the university administration; hence the creation of a situational leadership not only to delegate the highly motivated students but also to manage the student efforts in a more structured manner (Heskey et al. 2001). This leadership came in the form of the reviving of the University of Buea Student Union which was disbanded in 1995. As stated by one of the founding leaders:

*The University of Buea Student Union (UBSU) today was actually re-born in 2005 during a student rising that seem uncontrollable. We took an advantage of the fact that there was no leadership of the strike and decided to come up with something formal that we could use to pursue dialogue with the administration. (interview with former UBSU leadership member A, 17 June 2014)*

According to Heskey et al. (2001), leadership in which students or followers exhibit high commitment to a cause but low competency in negotiating their path to achieving that cause, requires good directing abilities. However, this was somewhat lacking as the UBSU went on to experience a rather frosty relationship with the university administration due to a number of factors which are discussed in the next section. Before looking at the ten-year relationship between the newly created UBSU and the UB management, we present a brief structure of the UBSU leadership and its functions.

As illustrated in Figure 1 the UBSU is divided into three main arms: the General Assembly, the Representative Council and the Executive Arm. The illustrative diagram indicates the different arms, their respective duties or functions as well as their constituencies.

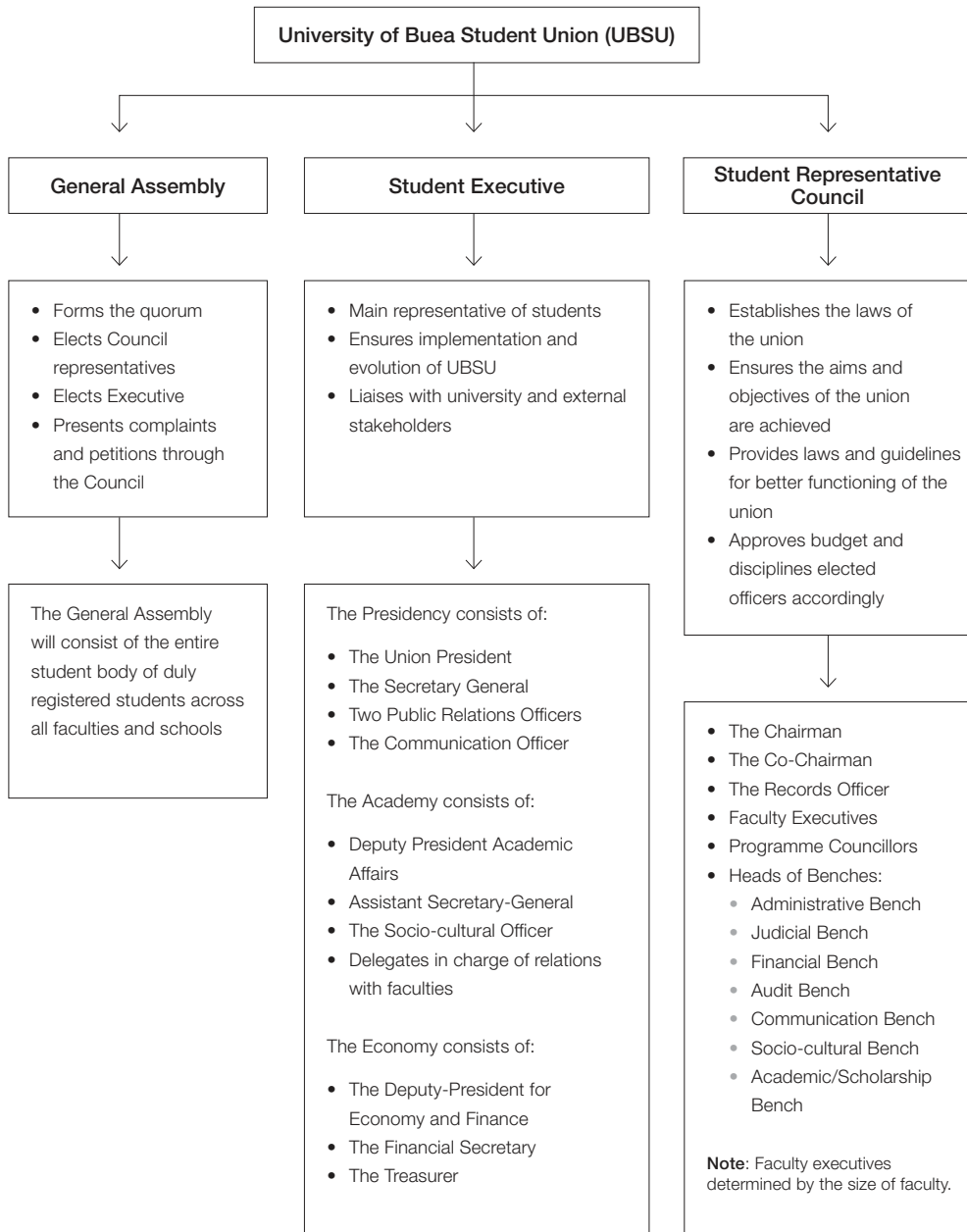
The next section provides a narrative account of some of the salient aspects which characterised the relationship between UBSU and the university leadership. Four features have been identified: the lack of adequate and mutual dialogue, ethno-regional politics, infighting within the union and the besieging of the union.

### *Authoritarian governance, shallow dialogue and student confrontations*

While Konings (2009) argues that the rise in violence was due to the lack of coordinated leadership which should have controlled the students, an even more important cause of the violence was the lack of recognition of the student union by the administration that had banned the same union about a decade ago. Konings (2009), however, goes on to recognise that the failure of one of the deputy vice-chancellors, Dr Endeley, to negotiate any dialogue with the students (in the absence of the VC who was away on an official visit), and the request of the forces of law and order to bring the strike under control, escalated the violence and shattered any hopes for meaningful dialogue. On her return, the VC further vehemently refused to broker any form of dialogue with the union leaders, arguing that the leadership was



**Figure 1** University of Buea Student Union organogram



Source: Developed by authors from the UBSU Constitution (2005)

not elected but rather self-proclaimed and thus did not represent the student body; that it violated the university regulations which forbade students from engaging in any form of protest as had been signed during the early years of the university.

In the face of this hostility towards the 'situational leadership' as described by one of the former leaders, the leadership decided to seek some form of immunity from the authoritarian administration by including two points on the 11 point list, which was initially provided by ADDEC. These were first the recognition of the re-birth of the UB student union that had been banned since 1995 as the only representation of the entire student body, and secondly that all university courses be available for re-sit examination sessions. In reaction to the VC's refusal to recognise the student leadership, her authoritarian behaviour, and continued police violence, the UBSU leadership added new demands, calling for the immediate replacement and transfer of the long-serving VC, the recognition by the university authorities of the revived student 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 as well as the removal of an allegedly dreadful 'shrine' that was strategically located near the university's entrance (Tanch 2005). The above scenario between the student leadership and university administration continued to display aspects of shallow dialogue which resulted in violent confrontations between students, administration and the forces of law and order.

Another manifestation of the authoritarian and non-dialogue approach towards student demands was also perceived by many in the appointment of Prof. Peter Agbor Tabi, a former Minister of Higher Education, as president of the newly created administrative council at UB. As former Minister of Higher Education, Agbor Tabi was renowned for his extreme authoritarian and brutal repression of student revolts during the early 1990s at the then University of Yaoundé (Konings 2002). His appointment was made in September in the wake of the student protest about a contested list of successful medical students; wherein the VC initially published a list of 127 students, all of whom were Anglophones. This was later overturned by the minister of higher education as he included 26 names on the list with all the added names being from the French part of the country. Even though the minister backed his actions as an attempt to provide a more regionally representative list, the students never accepted the reason and went on to violent reaction (cf. Azoro 2006; Sumelong 2006). While most senior administrators within the university perceived some of the student demands as '*unacceptable pre-conditions*' (senior faculty official), the appointment of the UB administrative council president was also perceived in many quarters as an attempt to reinforce political control over the university. To this end the council president was expected to establish peace and serenity at the UB campus on the terms of the university and national government, with little or no input from the student leadership who are supposed to contribute in decisions concerning students.

In early 2013, the UB witnessed more student protests and confrontation with the university authorities. One such confrontation occurred in February when the VC was locked in her car

under very hostile conditions for close to four hours by protesting students. According to the students, the UB administration had not recognised and responded to a number of student demands which included, inter alia, providing photocopies on campus for students, allowing students to read on campus through the night, facilitating the process of applying and obtaining transcripts and increasing premiums for students taking part in 11 February celebrations. However, the UB administration reiterated that the approach through which the demands were made was improper and did not follow the appropriate channel (Sako 2013). Another protest was in May when the students presented a number of demands from the university administration. There were four demands that students had put forward: firstly that the VC allows the UBSU Central Executive elections to be conducted as per its constitution; secondly, the VC should drop all the charges and allegations brought against the student union in a pending court case post the February protest. Thirdly, that an enabling environment be created for all UBSU leaders to write their first semester exams since they had missed the February exams; and finally that UBSU leaders have an inclusive dialogue between the university authorities and the student union (Mulango 2013b). However, most of these demands were not yielded to as the administration opted for a different route in addressing the crisis.

One of the former leaders also confirmed this by observing that during most of the negotiations with the administration,

*The administration neglected so many things in student governance because they wanted UBSU to function the way they wanted it to function. There was that direct control of UBSU activities without taking into consideration [the fact that] their constitution stipulated another thing... they want to impose all the time on UBSU. (interview with former UBSU leadership member B and current faculty president, 17 June 2014)*

However, comments from one of senior management staff on campus emphasised that the main point of contention between the administration and student union was that the union had never accepted the amendments to the UBSU constitution which were proposed by the administration (interview with senior UB administrator, 10 June 2014). One such amendment according to a former leader was the dissolving of the parliament or council which the administration perceived as even stronger than the executive arm. Furthermore, the use of the name parliament, as proposed by a former student leader, reminded some of the academics of *Le Parlement* (The Parliament), namely a student protest wing which had existed at the then University of Yaoundé and which was renowned for its violent protest.

Yet, following the failure of the VC's cabinet to respond favourably to the students' demands, there grew a sense of distrust as well as passive and active aggression between the two structures. In her response, the VC also emphasised the fact that students needed to be patient with certain demands. This failure of adequate dialogue between the student union and university administration could only usher in an aggressive reaction from the students and a

further authoritarian response from the university administration. This aspect is also echoed by Altbach (2006) who argues that students in their demands from university administration tend to be impatient, wanting change quickly, due in part to the brevity of the change in student generations and also due to a certain impatience common to young people.

### *The ethno-regional political tensions affecting student politics*

Since the onset of the creation of the student union, especially in its rebirth phase, most of the UBSU leaders came from the North-West Region. In fact with the first four UBSU leaders all hailing from the North-West, some administrators within the university as well as external stakeholders began to perceive the union as a political arm of other political movements founded by North-West politicians. They described the student union as the face of a disgruntled few from the North-West created to instigate unrest at the university. A former UBSU president describes the way the union was labelled right from its early years:

*We, however, had problems of ethnicity as we were first branded as North-Westerners who worked for the SDF and were there to discredit the state and bring down the UB. We were [described as] North Westerners who because we did not have a university for all these years were there to kill the UB. At some point the South West elites decided to rally South West youths to march against the UBSU leaders, but some of the youths noticed that this was involving them in the external politics of the country and refused to get involved. At some point within the university, some Bakwerians decided to rally South West students to form another student union to compete with us, but the union never took off as expected. (interview with former UBSU president, 16 June 2014)*

This perception was enforced by the perceived dominance by students from the North-West Region within the first four leadership terms. However, as described by one of the former UBSU leaders the picture was rather different.

*Coming from the North-West, and being a new association and born in a strike, it was a situational leadership structure and out of the five of us, myself from the North-West, the secretary from the North-West, the vice president a Bakwerian (from South-West), the faculty delegate a South Westerner and the fifth person a francophone from the Western region. We made sure that the five of us who decided to stake our heads were representative of the whole country. (interview with former UBSU President, 16 June 2014)*

The above statement reveals a conscious effort to ensure a balance in regional or geographical representation of the student leaders. However, looking at the majority and influence of those

from the North-West, there were still accusations that the union was an agent of the political opposition party to destroy the university, since the North-West Region had no state university at the time.

*Tribalism was never a topic among us. We never based our decision on whether one student came from this region or not. Rumours about students from the North-West trying to unseat South-West Vice-Chancellors and South-West students trying to unseat Vice-Chancellors from North-West [were not true at all]. I think when people fail they blame it on other issues or tribalism.* (interview with former UBSU leadership member A, 17 June 2014)

The above observations have also been captured by previous research, which describes this ethno-regional and political divide that affected the student union. Feko (2005) observes that especially in government circles, there were claims that the student union was not working on its own but that either the main opposition party, the SDF, with its headquarters in the North-West or the secessionist movement, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), were influencing the strike in some way. According to the South West elite, North-Westerners formed the majority of the student population and teaching staff at the UB, and were using the strike to establish North-West hegemony at the university (Konings 2009). The local Bakweri elite, who dominated the UB administration, were particularly shocked when they discovered that the vice-president and also spokesperson of UBSU, Alain Martin Nako was a Bakwerian. The UBSU leadership dismissed any allegations that the strike was politically motivated. One of the leaders went further to insist that even during negotiations during the month-long strike in April/May 2005, union leaders at the time made particular efforts to avoid all forms of engagement with the opposition party or the SCNC.

*In terms of that [external influence] I think during the days of UBSU's creation, we tried as much as possible to prevent external influence. After the union was proclaimed, the UB immediately aligned us to the [national] opposition party. Hence we tried as much to avoid external influence from other political parties and in the dialogue process we spoke only to people in the [CPDM] regime. We never got any political party involved; if we did that, I am not sure I would be talking to you today; I would be somewhere behind bars.* (interview with former UBSU president, 16 June 2014)

Hence it can be argued that at least during the early years of the student union, the leadership tried to steer clear of all external influence both from within and out of the university and in many ways kept students' demands as the priority on their agenda. However, as with many political organisations, as the years went by, the student union was 'hijacked' by selfish interests from within the union, which resulted in some core members being manipulated by external stakeholders for their own ends.

### *A besieged UBSU*

From interviews with former and current student leaders as well as with some senior administrative staff, it can be argued that UBSU was constantly under siege and made to serve other purposes than that for which it was established. From the data, it can be observed that three distinct groups of shareholders were involved. Two were external to the union; the first consisting of former leaders who had graduated but still had some hegemonic power over the subsequent leaders. The second group of stakeholders were some academic and administrative staff within the institution, including the VC's cabinet who used the union to achieve selfish ends. The third group was from within the union itself and manifested itself through the greed and selfishness of some of the student leaders who used the UBSU office and finances for selfish ends.

Starting with the internal issues, one of the former leaders of the union, who had served in the 2005 student leadership as well as during the 2008 to 2011 leadership observed that the UBSU that was formed during the 2005 strike had been there to represent the needs of the students. The leadership was committed to ensuring that students had better conditions of studies and living on and off campus. This respondent goes further to bemoan the extent to which UBSU had derailed from those virtues in pursuit of selfish agendas and exposing themselves to be used by external stakeholders who had interests other than those of students. Asked if UBSU actually represented the needs of the students, he reasoned as follows:

*Not to a very great extent as many people will say UBSU was successful. UBSU was for students but they did not always fight for the good of the students. During the early years, UBSU fought strictly for the rights of the students. You can look at the points on [its] first memorandum. Later, that [commitment] dwindled. I think as the years went by, good leaders leave and new ones come with other ideas and there were other issues. (interview with former UBSU leadership member A, 17 June 2014)*

One of the senior management administrators who commented on the leadership change in the UBSU administration over time also observed the shift in the level of dialogue and engagement with the administration, which initially had showed a more responsible leadership with the good of the students at the centre of all dialogue. He observes that subsequent student leadership became more violent and selfish in their dealings:

*Initially during the years (2007–2008) we had the superstructure but the students were more responsible, we argued and agreed to disagree and we made jokes, but towards 2009–2011 the group of students were terrible in their actions. They kidnapped students, beat students up and did horrible things. I don't think they had the students at heart but they used some of the issues as pretexts. (interview with senior UB administrator B, 10 June 2014)*

Another student leader who served in the union before its disbanding and currently serves as a faculty representative and who had first-hand experience in the running of the student union activities confirmed the above findings arguing that the latter version of the union was mostly geared towards selfish ends:

*UBSU did not to a larger extent satisfy the needs of students who voted them in power. But [if you] ask some of the students, they will actually tell you they were fighting for the needs of the students. But I will tell you as a member of UBSU, as a faculty president and as a student in the UB, UBSU was not really fighting for the interest of the students. I think it was more of personal interest. (interview with former UBSU leadership member B and current faculty president, 17 June 2014)*

The mandate and purpose of the UBSU was also misused and abused by some members in the university administration. Considering the fact that the long-serving VC was replaced in 2005 after the month-long strike by the reborn student union, as well as the replacement of her successor on 14 December 2006 after the Medical School debacle, which led to another violent strike less than 18 months after his appointment, some senior administrators within the institution assumed that there would be a major administrative change by the presidency after a major strike. Considering the fact that with each VC appointment, there were a number of other appointments within the university as well as promotions and transfers. Some student leaders and observers reported that some power hungry administrators used the student leadership to ignite various forms of unrest and violence with the hope that there could be another managerial reshuffling in which they could gain some form of promotion. A former student leader describes this as follows:

*The issue of external stakeholders [involves] especially [some members] within the university administration who used UBSU strikes to unsettle the university hoping to get the VC changed along with other senior members and hence gain some form of promotion. Most of the students confessed that there were other individuals who gave them money to cause problems and unsettled the university. The first VC was supposed to rule for 8 years instead of the 12 years she did. Since she was ousted during the strike and her successor was replaced during a strike, most administrators hoped to buy some of the union members to cause strike in order to forge a strike and then hope [for the VC] to be replaced. (interview with former UBSU president, 16 June 2014)*

A senior administrative staff, while not refuting the above claims of the role of external stakeholders within the university in influencing the activities of the student union, insists that if a student allows him/herself to be used by any person, he or she must take responsibility of his/her actions rather than blaming someone else. Another former UBSU leader and current

faculty officer agreed that even though there was no documented evidence of the meddling of university administration staff in the activities of the union, there were cases in which administrators in various ways tried to destabilise the university through the activities of the student union in order to achieve selfish aims.

*Even though there is no evidence, scientific justification, to pinpoint somebody aligning with UBSU, but I will tell you that they were because most of the time we did see some administration who want to create destabilisation in UB so that they will be appointed in the top management system in the University of Buea. When UBSU wants to publish a memo they will pass through these administrators to help them edit the memo and then will educate them on how to go about their issue. So, in the long run, they were some external stakeholders who manipulated or used UBSU in order to achieve their agenda. (interview with former UBSU leadership member B and current faculty president, 17 June 2014)*

Lastly, the student union activities were also perceived to be besieged by former student leaders who had graduated but still had some hold over the union. A current faculty officer who was also part of the student union leadership thinks that one reason for the disbanding of the union was, among other things, the fact that the union leadership in many ways became subject to the guiles and ideas of former student leaders who, despite having graduated from the university, still had a selfish interest in the running of the union.

*The fact that UBSU had lost confidence in students, the in-house fighting, UBSU divided into factions, the fact that they allowed people who have graduated about five or six years to interfere into the affairs of UBSU of present students, made UBSU to be very weak because it boils down to the fact [that] they cannot take decisions without consulting people who have graduated. They call them their 'godfathers', and the people will tell them what to do on campus, although they are not part of the campus. (interview with former UBSU leadership member B and current faculty president, 17 June 2014)*

Some of these interests of former students were in the management of student union membership dues, which students were compelled to pay before registration of their subjects at the start of the academic year. Even though the administration proposed that student payment of the UBSU membership fee should be optional, the union leaders obliged all students to pay the fee. Yet, there were no records of accountability of the student membership fees and even during the handing over of offices from one leadership to another, it was always a problem to get the outgoing members present to hand over the documents and bank account details to the incoming leadership. In another case, there was evidence from the office of the deputy vice-chancellor in charge of research and cooperation with the business world of how UBSU



members harassed business proprietors on campus, collecting rents and leasing out university property without the knowledge of the university administration. One of the documents revealed an agreement between the union and an outside business, leasing out university land to the value of about USD 3 000 without any form of authorisation from the university management. Some people believe that some of these actions were in partnership with former UBSU leaders who served as advisers to the leadership at the time.

### *Infighting within the student union itself*

As with many political setups, especially with increasing power being wielded by the student union, some of the student leaders began looking for ways to satisfy their personal agendas and selfish interests. This first manifested itself in the emergence of different wings of the student union, all challenging student union elections. Distinguished by their party colours, the Red, White and Yellow parties were initially aimed at strengthening the campaign process and ensuring a more democratic election process. The winning party would remain while the other parties were to be dissolved and integrated into the parliament and council. However, the parties continued to function unofficially even after losing the elections. The presence of more than one governing party within the union started confusion of leadership within the union and ushered in infighting. Even within the union itself, there was increasing fighting between the executive arm and the legislative. As observed by one of the former UBSU leaders, who currently serves as a student leader, factionalism between different camps was a major factor that led to discredit the union and its subsequent disbanding. Different camps were supported by different sections of or individuals within the administration for selfish purposes who used their financial influence to control the various factions of the student union (interview with former UBSU leadership member and current faculty president, 17 June 2014). When asked about the relationship between the student union and the students, another senior administrator commented:

*It was not cordial because each time they conducted elections, they had many party factions [yellow, white, red]... and then after the elections if one group won, the other ones now became hostile. So they did not want to see the other group succeed. Whereas the idea of forming those groups was that after the elections, those were dissolved but you find that after the result they persisted and made it difficult for the elected group to operate. (interview with UB senior administrator A, 10 June 2014)*

While the integration of some members of opposing factions into the council and parliament of the student union was meant to broker some form of peace and cooperation between the various contesting factions, rumours of infighting as well as counter-fighting within and across the factions continued to divide the student body and even the student leadership. One such instance was during the build up to the Youth Day celebration of 11 February 2013, when the

union was demanding an increase in the daily stipend paid to students for participating in the Day's activities. One former leader described the debacle as follows:

*There was camp faction. The white party and the yellow party agreed that students will not march during 11 February [i.e. Youth Day celebration], but we received rumours that the yellow party has received money from the administration to encourage students to march. So when the white party said the yellow party has received money from the administration to encourage them to march, they became very angry, and made it clear that the yellow party has boycotted the agreement that no student will march during 11 February. However, rumours also emerged that the white party has also collected money from other members of the central administration that they should go and march. So with that disagreement and confusion from left, right, centre, this made UBSU to actually lose its stand [credibility] as far as student opinion is concerned. (interview conducted with former UBSU leadership member B and current faculty president, 17 June 2014)*

During the 2009 lecturers' strike there was further evidence of factionalism between the president of the student representative council and the executive president of the student union as one group supported the on-going lecturers' strike while the union president went around urging students to go to class. While this was in alignment with university demands, it was against the council's advice and on deliberation, the council voted to suspend the student president's signature for one week (*Freedom Magazine* 2009).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The chapter set out to investigate how student participation in university governance has evolved at the University of Buea especially during the last decade to 2013. Using secondary and primary data, we argue that student participation in university governance continues to be fraught by external factors such as local and national political dynamics as well as ethno-regional battles. Evidence from the data showed a significant lack of cordial dialogue between the students and administration. It could be argued that while the perception is that the university administration seems more concerned with ensuring 'political correctness', student leaders on their part are embroiled in selfish agendas rather than working for the benefit of the whole. The analysis of data provides a number of lessons relating to student participation in university governance.

Firstly, a significant absence of dialogue between the student leadership and university administration resulted in a form of engagement characterised by violent protest and more activism rather than student politics. This absence of dialogue as well as a perceived authoritarian form of leadership from the administration resulted in long periods of violent protest from

students, destruction of property and businesses and even the loss of human lives. Again, this could be reflective of both stakeholders having differing interests in the processes of university governance. While recent developments indicate an improved level of dialogue between the current student leadership and university administration, an interesting study would be to assess the changes in both the student leadership and university administration which have led to more peaceful engagement and its implication for students' participation in university governance.

The second lesson from the analysis supports earlier findings that student politics in Cameroon continue to be significantly affected by ethno-regional factionalism fuelled by different parts of society, including the university administration, external stakeholders such as local elites, as well as the media. This is compounded by the Anglophone–Francophone divide in which all forms of protest are immediately ascribed to the opposition party of the English-speaking part of the country. While there is not adequate data to substantiate this link, this discourse characterises most discussion during periods of student protest (cf. Eyoh 1998).

Thirdly, and a relatively new finding is the influence of external stakeholders in the process of student politics at the UB. While students were in many ways accused of being instigated by external political parties or movements, the findings reveal the contrary. The findings from this case study differ from other studies in most African countries in which student unions align with political parties or trade unions in the struggle for independence or other liberation movements (Boahen 1994; Mazrui 1995; Nkinyangi 1991; also see other chapters in this book). However, in the case of UB, two of the main stakeholders external to the student body are former students and university administrators who use student protests to achieve personal gains. Due to the sensitive nature of the political terrain in Cameroon, student leaders, as observed from the data, managed to insulate the student union from influence of other political parties. The data, however, does not interrogate to what extent political parties would have wanted or tried to influence the student union.

Finally, the analysis shows that as in most political movements, the UB student union in many ways shifted from its initial ideals of representing student needs to being selfish intermediaries between the students and the administration. Student leaders used their offices to exploit students of their annual levies, extorting money from unsuspecting entrepreneurs, as well as conniving with corrupt administrative staff to satisfy their greed and that of their patrons. While student activism during the early years of higher education in Cameroon and at the University of Buea had a more legitimate approach to addressing challenges facing students, such as access to better living and study facilities, in the latter years, student activism at the University of Buea increasingly became an avenue for students and other stakeholders to forge a selfish and personal agenda. This is coupled with the lack of employment opportunities for graduates who see a continuous role in student union politics not as a means but rather an end. This reflects Zeilig and Dawson's (2008) argument that most of the student crises in Africa occur because students do not see themselves as being in transition to another stage of life.

In conclusion, we argue that student participation in university governance in Cameroon in general and at the UB in particular has over the last decade not changed much. Despite

changes in the top management of the university, which has witnessed four vice-chancellors in the last decade, the approach to student participation in governance has not changed significantly. Authoritarianism, force and limited dialogue continues to be the modus operandi of the university authorities at all levels. While this can be attributed to the unchanged nature of the national political landscape, which appoints the university management and in many ways expects compliance, it can also be argued that student leaders might also have to adopt a different approach to engaging with the university administration using a more transparent and peaceful approach.

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