Cameroonian Youths and the Protest of February 2008

Jeunes du Cameroun et protestation de février 2008

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Cameroonian Youths and the Protest of February 2008

In February 2008, the nation of Cameroon stood on the brink. During five harrowing days between February 25 and 29, life in Cameroonian cities was reminiscent of that of the early 1990s when “*Les villes mortes*” or “Ghost Town”, was dominant (Eyoh 1998; Takougang & Krieger 1998). A non-violent protest which began as a transportation workers strike in February quickly turned into an anti-Biya campaign. Streets in the cities of Douala, Kumba, Buea, Limbe, Yaoundé, and Bamenda became centers of violence, looting, police brutality, and destruction¹. On February 26, city administrators imposed a state of emergency. The following day, February 27, President Paul Biya broke his silence. In a nationwide televised address, he admonished Cameroonians to stop the mayhem, vowing to prosecute to the fullest those “demons” that had “manipulated” Cameroon’s youths. Labeling as “apprentice sorcerers”, those he claimed misled the youths; he promised swift action to restore the *statu quo*. The actions of the wrongdoers were doomed to failure, he fumed, since Cameroon “cannot be built through destruction”². Although his now emboldened critics were quick to respond, Biya did not retreat. Indeed, the present crisis seemed to be one of those occasional popular uprisings that historically test the mettle of “strongmen” such as the Cameroonian leader. But this was much more. Peace, Biya warned, would be restored by any means necessary. And the casualties mounted. In city after city, security forces implemented Biya’s clampdown while Cameroonians in the Diaspora—connected to the homeland *via* the internet—watched and waited for news from relatives and friends. For a brief period on February 28 it appeared as if Cameroon might slide into open revolution, but the next day the tide began to turn. Biya’s security forces prevailed and the nation settled back to calculate its losses, and learn the lessons³.

Cameroon’s many problems and its seeming inability to march with worldwide trends was brought into sharp focus by the protest of February

1. *The Frontier Telegraph*, April 25, 2008; *Cameroon Tribune*, February 27, 2008.
2. *Cameroon Tribune*, February 28, 2008; *Chronicle*, March 6-16, 2008; *New York Times*, February 29, 2008, see KAMÉ (2009: 84).
3. *Headlines*, March 3, 2008; *Eden*, March 5, 2008.

2008. The list of possible flashpoints is well-known: ethnic and regional rivalry, political and economic corruption, chronic unemployment, and social and urban decay (Takougang & Krieger 1998; Mbembe 2001; Bayart 2009). This unrest touched on all of Cameroon's flashpoints and dramatically underscored the nation's failure to keep up with regional and global trends⁴. The broad and multifaceted nature of the events of February 2008 has made correct analysis more difficult. To many it was a response to the rising cost of food, petrol, and other basic necessities; to others the demonstration was a conspiracy created by the opposition political parties in Cameroon to destabilize the Biya regime, and to others the street demonstration was a dress rehearsal of an impending national crisis. One method to understand the true meaning of the 2008 events is to focus on the "youth" of Cameroon. While recent literature has raised questions about applying western age categories to define youth in Africa, this study defines youth as the generation born between the eve of the beginning of Biya's presidency to the mid-1990s. This essay will attempt to put into perspective the role of youth in recent Cameroonian history. It is the contention of this essay that the role played by Cameroon's youth was not only a key element in the protest themselves, but also a historical culmination of social and political trends in post-colonial Cameroon. Given that youths made up the overwhelming majority of the protesters, that event constitute a strong indicator of the urgent call for political, economic, and social change.

During the last twenty-five years the literature on youth in Cameroon and Africa as a whole has been on the rise. Early paradigms labeled Africa's youth as a "lost generation", who frequently resorted to violence, looting and rioting to achieve their goals. Youths, those studies concluded, lacked an ideology and were unable to forge alliances with other groups. They were unpredictable, powerless, and unable to affect real change (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1985; Mbembe 1985; O'Brien 1996). In the early 1990s youths played a vital role in the transformations which led to the introduction of multiparty systems in most African nations. Partly as a result of this, there was a new evaluation of the role of youths in the post-colonial state. Earlier studies which depicted youths as selfish and violent were been reversed. In Cameroon, youths made up a large proportion of the opposition movement. Students of the University of Yaoundé and Buea were particularly active in the political, economic, and social landscape. They joined demonstrations against corruption, social decay, and Beti-Bulu domination; and also supported the call for a national conference. Their demands mirrored those of the larger community (Takougang & Krieger 1998; Jua 2003; Konings 2002, 2006; Fokwang 2003, 2009). Following the collapse of Cameroon's economy youths came up with more creative ways

4. *The Post*, February-March, 2008; *Eden*, February-March, 2008; *Cameroon Tribune*, February-March, 2008; *Headlines*, February-March, 2008; *New York Times*, March 29, 2008; *Washington Post*, March 29, 2008; See KAMÉ (2009).

to contribute to the economy. There was the introduction of the *Bendskin*, or *Okada*, a form of motorbike transport. Those activities challenged notions of youth passivity and inability to affect change (Konings 2006; Simone 2007). In response to the deplorable economy, youths also became a part of the criminal underworld with activities such as “scamming”, “419”, “*Feyman*”, and increased prostitution (Malaquais 2001; Jua 2003; Ndjio 2008). Other studies have shown that youths from pre-colonial times through the post-colonial era were able to use various artistic means to respond to their marginalization. They found ways to challenge traditional systems which oppressed them (Argenti 2007). Despite this new direction, recent analyses on the role of youth in the Cameroonian events of February 2008 have tended to reflect older paradigms of the “lost generation”. B. P. Kamé’s (2009), *Les émeutes du Renouveau: Cameroun, février 2008* picture of the role of youth in 2008 largely adheres to the amorphous “lost generation” approach: youths engage in violence and looting only as a reaction to pressing and immediate economic concerns. With few exceptions, the youths in Kamé’s study are voiceless, and are treated as a monolithic movement—yet amorphous movement.

This essay will take a different view of the meaning of the 2008 events and of the role of youth in these disturbances. Far from being just another violent reaction in response to the rising cost of food or the result of nefarious political efforts of Biya’s opposition, the events of 2008—and the role of youth in these events—are deeply rooted in the nation’s post-colonial history. The grievances expressed by the youths were symbolic of larger societal problems. The protest showed a pattern of continuous youth involvement in Cameroon’s political arena. It is hoped that this study will add to the growing literature of youth activism in Cameroon, and Africa as a whole.

Defining the Youths of 2008

During the better part of the Biya presidency Cameroonians have suffered immense hardship on many fronts. Limited reform has taken place in all vital areas of the country. While most Cameroonians had grown impatient, the shortcomings and broken promises of the Biya regime were particularly onerous to a specific generation of Cameroonians—a generation that would play a key role in the events of February 2008.

The youths who participated in the protest of 2008 were part of a generation that had come of age in a multiparty Cameroonian society. Their composition transcended ethnic lines. They were Anglophones, Francophones, Bassa, Bamileke, Ewondo, Bakweri, Douala, Bangwa, Mankon, and much more. They came from the various political parties in Cameroon. They were members of the Cameroon People Democratic Movement (CPDM), Social Democratic Front (SDF), and other political parties (Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008). In short, the group was symbolic of Cameroon’s diversity.

They had been attracted to the protest for various reasons: some for political reasons, while others were there for economic and social causes⁵. Whatever their motives for participating, they were united by the belief that for too long the country had been falling backwards. Speaking in front of the Kumba Market the local commentator, Prophet Tom, captured the mode of the country: “Cameroon dey go for gear back-back [Cameroon is going in the reverse]” he said⁶.

The youths were fed-up. “Je vais quitter cet endroit [...]; Il n’y a rien à faire ici. Ça va faire deux ans que j’ai obtenu ma maîtrise. Il n’y a rien à faire. Comment un homme peut vivre comme ça dans son propre pays?” (“I’ll depart from here [...]; there is nothing to do in Cameroon. It has been two years since I finished with my *maîtrise*. How can one live in his country like this?”) Pascal, a graduate of University of Yaoundé II at Soa said. Marie, another graduate of University of Yaoundé I was more frustrated. “Hardship and problems”, she lamented, had forced her to engage in unbecoming conduct. Joyce, with a law degree from University of Yaoundé II was enrolled in the *maîtrise* program, but dropped out for the lack of money and the fact that they were no job guarantees after graduation. She was frustrated at the deplorable economic situation. She thinks of going either to the US or Europe for further studies one day⁷. Many young graduates of Cameroonian universities had relocated to Yaoundé on the assumption that is where the opportunities exist, but the city has brought nothing but misery to them. Anna, another university graduate operated a call box in Yaoundé, but still there was no head way. Others were on the edge of giving up. Michael, a high school graduate, had turned down the opportunity to attend any of the local universities because he planned to go overseas or “fall bush”. After five years, he is still in Cameroon living with his parents. He had grown frustrated, and talked of a feeling of hopelessness. Yvonne, young and attractive, and at twenty-six operated a call box in Limbe. Pregnant at twenty-two, she dropped out of the University

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5. KAMÉ (2009: 46); Interviews in Cameroon, 2007-2008. Comment about the interviews conducted in Cameroon: during the last twelve years the author has been in Cameroon each year from late June to the end of July. While in Cameroon the author has worked with, and interacted extensively with many young people especially those from the local universities. The program the author is assigned to in Cameroon has employed a variety of university graduates and students on a temporary basis at different points. In Cameroon the bulk of the author’s time is spent in the towns of Yaoundé, Buea, Limbe, Douala, Bamenda, Kumba, and Limbe. Most of the interviews for this project were conducted with people who reside in those cities. Given the nature of Cameroon, the author decided not to include the full identity especially last names of most of those interviewed. It pains me to do that but the security of the people interviewed is more important. In some cases where the author feels that there will be no possible repercussion full names have been included.
 6. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2006.
 7. Interview in Cameroon, July 2008; January 2003.

of Buea. Her son lives with her parents. The father of her son is somewhere in Europe, and promised to marry her, but that has not materialized. She is angry at herself, and hopes to also “fall bush”⁸. The youths who participated in the protest were made up of many Joyces, Paschalls, Annas, Maries, and Yvones. Whether in Yaoundé, Limbe, Kumba, Buea, and Bamenda, the stories were similar. At the International Hotel in Bamenda, the young men who walked in and spoke to the author all had something to say about the protest and why they participated⁹. The youth were angry, frustrated, and impatient. They had had enough. Those who joined the ranks of the protest ranged in age from approximately fifteen to thirty-five.

“Il y a des jeunes, mais la façon de changer les choses n’est pas de détruire la propriété. Oui, il y a la frustration, mais vous devez travailler à travers le processus démocratique.” (“They are young, but the way to change things is not destroy property. Yes, there is frustration, but you must go through the democratic process”), Frederic Kodock, former Minister of State of Agriculture, stated¹⁰.

Janet Garvey, the then US ambassador to Cameroon was blunt in her assessment of the sources of the protest. “Frankly, the frustration of the people had boiled over [...]. There was anger over the constitutional amendment, unemployment, corruption, and a whole host of problems [...] the irony of the matter is that many of these issues could be solved if the will is there”, she said¹¹. Both Francophone and Anglophones were protesting, she added.

Though the exact number of the youths who participated is unknown, they made up the largest number of those who took to the streets. They were literate, with education levels ranging from secondary, high school, some university work to university graduates. They were typical of Cameroonian youth. They enjoyed music: Makossa, Coupé-Décalé, Bitkusi, Ndombolo, Rap, P-Square and much more. They seemed not to have been motivated and influenced by any established ideology such communism, capitalism, and socialism. They were not part of any extremist group. Some listened to fanatics and self-proclaimed prophets of the likes of T. B. Joshua, and Pastor Chris.

“T. B. Joshua helps us to forget our problems [...] no job, no money [...]. Oh God, help me” one said. “Biya has really messed us up”, said another who graduated from the University of Dschang in 2005¹².

The youths were held together by the common problems of unemployment, poverty, Biya’s corruption, and a feeling of hopelessness. They were

8. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

9. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

10. Meeting with Kodock at his residence in Yaoundé, July 2008.

11. Visit to US Embassy, Yaoundé, July 2008.

12. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2007.

angry at Biya's attempt to extend his stay in power. With no prospect for employment, some paraded the streets late going to bed late at night, and woke up late in the morning. It was meaningless to have any structure. It was a routine they repeated over and over. The economy had generated little for them. They lived at home with their parents¹³.

For years some gave the system a chance holding out hope for better days. Some were supportive of the main political party, CPDM.

"Ces gens viennent de partout. Certains pensent qu'ils sont seulement des Bamilékés. Ils sont Ewondo aussi. Ce n'est pas important de quel village tu viens. Lorsque vous avez faim et que vous êtes pauvre vous êtes en colère." ("They come from all over. Some think these are only the Bamilekes [...] there are Ewondos also. It doesn't matter your ethnic origin. When you are poor and hungry, you are angry"), said Jean, an employee of Hotel Jouvence in Yaounde, adding that "Mon frère, le pays est dur." [My brother, it is difficult in the country].

For years those youths were dismissed as invisible. Their patience and inaction was misinterpreted as an endorsement of the prevailing policy, their silence was misunderstood as a weakness. Those youths were typical, and represented the consciousness of a generation. This generation had reached its breaking point. The nation's leadership gave them no hope. They were tired, fed up, and wanted a better Cameroon for themselves and the future generation. They had spoken up before, but no one listened. For them enough was enough with Biya's policies, and at the beginning of 2008 they were poised on the brink of taking direct action.

Among the youths were also *Feyman*, *419s*, and *Scammers*. *Feymania* means "swindling", in Pidgin English (Konings 2006: 47; Ndjio 2008: 205). Other names for this type of activity include "419", "scamming", "*doublé*", and "dealers"¹⁴. Whatever the label, the sole purpose is extracting wealth from the victim. *Fey* men and women operate at both domestic and international level (Malaquais 2001; Konings 2006: 47; Ndjio 2008). Over the last several years, the author has heard numerous stories and examples of "419" activities in Cameroon.

A reference to a section in the Nigerian criminal code, "419" includes a variety of non-violent crimes such as forgery, impersonation, scams, and fraud (Apter 1999). Given the large numbers of Igbos in the urban centers of Douala, Limbe, Kumba, Bamenda, and Buea, it is no surprise that those illegal acts were referred to as "419". Young men and women spend many hours at Cybercafés connecting with unsuspecting people from other parts of the world hoping to con them out of money. A case in point is that of a young lady the author met at a Cybercafé in Mbonge Road, Kumba. Linda,

13. Interviews in Cameroon July 2007, 2008; See also JUA (2003) and FOKWANG (2007).

14. Interviews in Cameroon, 2005-2007.

twenty-two and a university dropout, referred to what she did as “scamming”¹⁵. Typically the routine is straight forward, she said. The “scammer” receives e-mail addresses, e-mails the victims with hopes of starting a conversation, and if a conversation develops, the “scammer” rushes to make a connection on “Skype”. The pace increases after a phone conversation begins. Depending on the victim’s interest as determined by the “scammer” the conversation could either be geared towards establishing a lucrative business deal or making a love connection? If all goes well, the victim begins to wire money to the “scammer” either through Money gram or Western Union money transfer. “Scammers” usually discontinue the conversation when they suspect that the victim has become suspicious. Because “scammers” go by different names and carry different identification documents, they are not easily traceable. Like any other business, Linda explained, there are also losses because she spends a lot of time and money at the *Cybercafé*. She had the time, she concluded¹⁶. They were many Lindas, and *Feymen* in the group. They had gone into the criminal underworld because the economy had created no employment for them.

But not all youths participated in, and supported the protest. A young man the author met in downtown Yaoundé explained why he couldn’t be involved in the unrest.

“Je ne peux pas être impliqué. Ma famille est pauvre. Les espions du gouvernement sont partout” (“I cannot be involved. My family is poor, and government spies are all over”)¹⁷.

Many youths rejected the street demonstrations. Like their peers, they were urban, frustrated, unemployed, but unlike them, they had given up. They accommodated with the system. They concluded that nothing good was going to come out of the protest. Biya, they argued, would respond violently, and they were not prepared to be hurt¹⁸. They might have said more than they knew because their prediction was right on target.

Immediate Causes

At the turn of the New Year, 2008, there was a feeling of uneasiness, fear, and uncertainty in the country. Biya’s request to amend Article 6.2 of the constitution which dealt with presidential term limits caught many by surprise, and confirmed the suspicion of others. That request soon dominated the conversation of most Cameroonians. Those who had hoped for an end to the Biya presidency in three years now wandered how much longer their

15. Interviews in Cameroon, 2007.

16. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

17. Interviews in Cameroon, July 13, 2008.

18. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

misery would continue. Every measurable indicator at the beginning of 2008 showed that Cameroonians were suffering: high unemployment, chronic poverty, corruption, and social decay (Eyoh 1998, 2004; Mbembe 2001; Gros 2003; Konings & Nyamjoh 2003; Mbu 2006; Baxter 2008). There were several sources of the protest but the most immediate ones included the failure to meet the grievances of the various transport unions, youth frustrations, and Biya's request to eliminate presidential term limits.

With a history of workers mobilization, the transport union has effectively used strikes to improve its labor conditions. On January 5, a confederation of transport trade unions in Yaounde sent a list of demands to the Prime Minister, Inoni Ephraim. The unions requested an immediate end to the scandalous fines of 25,000 to 50,000 FCFA assessed on vehicles for illegal parking in Yaounde. They also asked for the elimination of the towing and impoundment fees of those vehicles. Victor, a longtime township taxi driver in Yaounde stated that those fines were vicious, and wondered whether the money collected went to the council or ended up in private pockets. "If a driver pays 25,000 Frs. to reclaim his vehicle, how much can he make in profit [...]. Taxi business is no longer profitable", he said¹⁹. The union also complained about the frequent police checks in streets which have no purpose but to extort money from drivers. Police officers in Cameroon have a culture of doing this. An additional grievance was the high cost of processing documents before a vehicle can be operational on the road as a taxi. The transport union informed the prime minister that failure to satisfy their demands would result in a strike already scheduled for February 25.

On January 8, to the surprise of the union, prices of petroleum products went up: super petrol went up from 584 Frs. to 600 Frs. diesel from 535 Frs. to 550 Frs., and kerosene rose from 355 Frs. to 380 Frs.²⁰. Attempts to explain that the government had no control over the price hike were unacceptable. Convinced that it had been snubbed, the transport union rejected the official position that those increases were a consequence of World Bank policies in Cameroon. Despite the mistrust, negotiations continued. In a meeting on February 22 with representatives of the urban transport representatives, Robert Nkili, the then Minister of Labor, and Gonoukou Haounai, the then Minister of Transport, asked the representatives of the transport union to call off the planned strike of February 25, and promised to remedy the situation²¹. It was a last ditch effort to stem the tide, but it was too-little-too-late. The strike was on as planned.

But events in the city of Douala proved to be more problematic. With a population of over three million people, Douala with its many neighborhoods was a hotbed of political activism. The city was a major front in

19. Interview in Cameroon, July 2008.

20. KAMÉ (2009: 69); *The Post*, Feb. 25, 2008.

21. *The Post*, February 25, 2009.

the political unrest of the early 1990s, and continued to be the residence of some of the most vocal anti-Biya critics. Neighborhoods such as Bepanda, Makepe, and Madagascar were symbolic of the economic misery and neglect which had become one of the trademarks of the Biya administration. Those neighborhoods were infested with social decay, crime, unemployment, homelessness, prostitution, and outright misery. For obvious reasons, youths in those areas had had enough with the political establishment, and were determined to challenge any and all attempts to extend Biya's stay in power. They joined the public demonstration against the call for a constitutional amendment.

Given the uproar over Biya's request to change the constitution, and the prospects of more trouble, Governor Fai Yengo Francis of the Littoral Province, on January 5, issued an Order banning public protests and demonstrations. He vowed to bring to justice violators of that order; and repeatedly called in the security forces to dispel protestors. Leaders of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), and other opposition parties chose to ignore the Order. On January 16, Mboua Massock, also known as "*combatant*", because of his stature as a major opposition leader, and Jean-Michel Nintcheu, field chairman of the SDF in Wouri organized a protest against the constitutional revision at the Ndougé Stadium in Bepanda. Both Massock and Nintcheu are determined, committed, and daring. A master organizer, Massock played a crucial role in mobilizing youths in the early 1990s. Massock and Nintcheu's followers were not deterred by Fai Yengo's police machine, tear gas, threats, and jail. They stayed the course, and repeatedly defied the ban on public protest. On February 23rd, other urban centers became involved in what would soon become a massive national demonstration. And with no apparent response to the demands made by the transport union, the stage was set for a showdown on February 25.

As if Douala city administrators did not already have enough problems, there was the issue of the *Bendskin* motor bike taxis. Douala was an epic center in the mobilization of *Bendskin* drivers. They too had grown impatient with the high cost of petroleum products, repeated police checks, and the excessive force used by city administrators to regulate *Bendskin* motor bikes. *Bendskin* is a word in Pidgin English literally translated as "bend your skin". Believed to have originated in Douala, the idea of *Bendskin* transportation spread quickly, and by the late 1990s, was in major cities in the country including Yaounde, Bamenda, Bafoussam, Kumba, Nkongsamba, and Limbe. In Anglophone Cameroon, *Bendskin* is also referred to as *Okada*. *Bendskin* represented the ingenuity and creativity of young people (Konings 2006: 48). In Douala, *Bendskin* drivers hail mostly from the Bamileke ethnic group, and their ages range between eighteen and thirty-five, and all are males. They share a common goal of improving their condition. They organized unions, developed policies to protect their business, and requested and received recognition from the local city government. They have

become a major force in each urban area. They have protested anti-*Bendskin* policy, and blocked access roads. For example in July 2003 when word went out that a nineteen year old *Bendskin* driver had been killed near the market of Nkololoun, other drivers rushed to the site, and caused a major traffic jam. For almost eight hours, *Bendskin* drivers almost brought traffic to a stop in the economic center of the city (Simone 2007: 77-79). Today, revenue from *Bendskin* business is a vital part of any city's economy²². Given the ability of *Bendskin* drivers to organize and mobilize, it is not surprising that they played a vital role in the protest of 2008.

By mid-February, *Bendskin* taxi drivers had had enough. In Douala, *Bendskin* drivers devised a plan to block traffic. Given their numbers of forty-two thousand, they believed that their actions would have a severe impact on the economy of Cameroon's economic capital. On February 21, a select few rode from neighborhood to neighborhood to inform people of the planned strike scheduled for February 25. The demonstration was against the rapid increase in the price of fuel, and the repeated bribes demanded at police checkpoints. They were tired. As plans for the demonstration proceeded, city administrators scrambled to come up with a response. *Bendskin* drivers advertising the strike were attacked by police. On February 23, the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) of Wouri, Bernard Atebede, hired the propagandist Papa Douala to exhort people to remain calm and peaceful in the face of the *Bendskin* strike. But the "irate *Bendskin* riders dragged him out of his publicity van, sucked out fuel from the tank of the van, and were just about setting fire on the vehicle, when gendarmes arrived and stopped them"²³. The moment of truth had come.

Yet they were other indirect sources of the protest. For years US ambassadors in Cameroon have been critical of the level of corruption in the nation, and this was especially true during the tenure of Niels Marquardt who gave many anti-corruption speeches in Cameroon. His predecessor, John M. Yates, US Ambassador to Cameroon between 1999 and 2001, was equally critical of Cameroon's leadership. In a visit to his office in Yaounde Ambassador Yates reiterated that Cameroon is a wealthy nation on the verge of taking off but for the massive corruption and general malaise in the country²⁴. Yet, among the former ambassadors, the most vocal and blunt critic of Cameroon's corruption was Ambassador Janet Garvey whose tenure as ambassador in that nation recently came to an end. On February 5, Ambassador Garvey informed the press that the United States could not support a constitutional change to "prolong Biya's long and tedious stay in power"²⁵. "We believe periodic change in leadership helps renew our

22. Interviews in Cameroon, 2007.

23. *The Post*, February 25, 2008.

24. Visit to the US Embassy, Yaoundé, July 1999.

25. *The Post*, February 15, 2008.

democracy”, she stated²⁶. A career diplomat, Garvey stated that it would be a blunder to “parachute” from the top such an important amendment. She strongly suggested that all Cameroonians need to be involved in the conversation²⁷. Garvey, who has met with Biya a few times stated that he was “very smart [...] a master politician, and manipulator”. “At a minimum of 77, I wonder how long he can hang on in power but I think he will run for re-election”, Garvey stated²⁸. Garvey’s comments of February 5 were misread by some as an indication that the US would intervene to assist young Cameroonians once a protest was underway. *The Post*’s headline: “Janet Garvey: Comforting the Afflicted”, said more than it realized. Some young people talked of imminent support from the US²⁹.

Not surprisingly, CPDM activists responded forcefully to Ambassador Garvey’s position, warning her to stay clear of Cameroon’s internal politics. Accusing her of hypocrisy, the CPDM “wondered why the Ambassador stood against the bid to change the Cameroon Constitution when the US has amended its constitution twenty-five times”³⁰. Undeterred, Ambassador Garvey stood by her remarks, and spared no opportunity to publicly re-state her position.

Despite the monumental economic and social problems, transport workers strike, and the impatience of the *Bendskin* riders, it remains true that an overwhelming number of Cameroonian youths had gone to the streets to protest the proposed constitutional change.

The Protest

On Saturday, February 23rd, a massive demonstration organized at Rond Point Madagascar, Douala had turned violent. Planned by Nintcheu, It was designed to mobilize the people against the proposed constitutional revision. Not surprisingly police intervened, used tear gas, and opened fire. When the dust settled two people were death, and many were injured. Alex Raoul Pelo, 21 and Gingay Louvert Fouambouh, 24 became the first casualties of the protest of 2008. They were young, vibrant, and did not have to die. The casualties and the injuries changed the dynamics of the protest. The stage was set for a confrontation as the protestors vowed to continue with the struggle.

As word of the violence spread to other urban centers, residents of Douala prepared for the worst. Security forces paraded the streets. Sunday, February 24, was relatively calm, and in Douala there was a feeling of an uneasy

26. *Eden*, February 20-25, 2008.

27. Visit to the US Embassy, Yaoundé, July 2008.

28. Visit to the US Embassy, Yaoundé, July 2010.

29. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

30. *The Post*, February 15, 2008.

peace. In Yaoundé, Kumba, Limbe, Bafousam, Buea, and Bamenda, transport workers prepared for the beginning of a strike. It was slated to be a peaceful protest, a resident of Kumba said³¹. On Monday, February 25, protesters gathered at different sites in their cities. Public transport including taxis and *Bendskin* were almost non-operational in those urban centers. Yaoundé was hit the hardest. Normally spared from protest activities, this one was different. People trekked to work, grocery stores, car-pooled, and hitch-hiked. Urban centers looked deserted. During most of the day the demonstration remained peaceful and non-violent. But by nightfall, tempers flared between security forces and the peaceful demonstrators resulting in some violence. As people retired for the evening, they braced for a tougher Tuesday. And it was then that violence erupted in most areas affected by the protest.

On February 26, an agreement was reached with the leaders of the transporter's syndicates in Yaoundé; and the drivers' strike was officially called off. The agreement reduced the price of petrol (super) by six francs to the new price of 594 Frs., and diesel and kerosene was reduced by five francs to 545 Frs. and 375 Frs. respectively. Neither side was satisfied with the agreement. Drivers accused their leaders of having sold out, and the government realized the dilemma of being caught in the situation to abide by international agreements. Yet few around the nation even noticed the agreement. The attention had shifted to the street demonstrations.

If the goal was to undermine the demonstration with minor concessions, then the leadership had miscalculated. The protest had moved into a more violent phase in which government buildings, businesses, shops, gas stations were either vandalized, looted, destroyed or torched. In Kumba the Departments of Treasury, Taxation, Brasseries du Cameroun, and the Ministries of Secondary, Basic Education, Agriculture were destroyed, burnt, and looted. At least six people were reported killed as a result of the riot. The City of Douala bore the brunt of the attack. In addition to the looting and vandalism, petrol stations, PMUS call boxes, and stores were vandalized. SIDEM, the company that trades in Caterpillars, Trailers, and other heavy duty was burnt. Its losses were estimated to be about three billion francs. Cities including Dshang, Buea, and Bamenda were equally hit³².

By February 27, a strike was taking place in thirty-one municipalities and in five of the ten provinces. Billed as a protest against rising prices of fuel and food shortage, it was in truth a spontaneous movement against corruption, social decay, Beti-Bulu domination, and Biya's back door maneuver to change the constitution. It was a movement against the marginalization of Anglophone and against the continuous exploitation of Cameroon by France. It was a movement against the almost thirty years reign and failed

31. Interview in Cameroon, July 2008.

32. *Eden*, March 3-4, 2008; *The Post*, March 2008.

policies of Biya. The flashpoints of Cameroon had finally reached full-circle. Cameroonians abroad joined the protest and demonstrated in front of the Cameroon embassies in London, Paris, Geneva, Washington D.C. and other cities. The grievances had been building for many years. A peaceful non-violent direct action protest quickly turned into a violent protest against the regime. Placards carried by strikers indicated glimpses into their frustrations. Samples of them were: "Paul Biya, La jeunesse avant la constitution", "Hungry man is angry man", "Biya Must Go", "No More Biya", "No Constitutional Amendment", "Down with France", "No to Constitutional Amendment", "No Life President", "End the Corruption", "*Non à la vie chère*" et "*Non à la fermeture des radios et télévisions privées*", and "Southern Cameroon Independence", "Amnesty International: Cameroonians Need Your Help", and "We don't want the United States or the United Nations to come after the people have died"³³. Police responded with tear gas, beatings, arrests, and torture. Police also opened fire and the casualties mounted.

At the peak of the crisis, the Catholic Bishops Council in the nation issued a declaration calling on both the government and the strikers to use peaceful means to address the problems³⁴. Led by the then Cardinal Christian Tumi, the Catholic Church has often been the voice of the voiceless in Cameroon. In his writings and speeches Cardinal Tumi was always outspoken of the brutality of the Biya presidency. On numerous occasions, the church has challenged the Biya regime to do better. A devout Catholic and former seminarian, Biya has from time to time consulted with Cardinal Tumi (2006).

Others who initially supported the protest forcefully condemned the violence. It robbed the protest of its main goal, and thereby gave the government a justification to brutally crush the revolt. The reasons for the protest were now secondary as national attention shifted to the violence, and the destruction of property. People questioned the destruction of businesses such as Brasseries du Cameroun which provided gainful employment for the region. Many feared for the worst. In Kumba teachers were stunned by the burning of the Delegation of Education which housed documents for primary education³⁵. In Bamenda, business leaders were terrified of what continuous instability would do to their establishment. Civic leaders appealed to the looters to stop. But the worst was still to come.

Leaders of the CPDM and the opposition political parties blamed each other for the violence. The SDF and other opposition parties lashed out at the CPDM for taking the nation to the brink of a catastrophe. Labeling Biya as an "absentee landlord", John Fru Ndi, Chairman of the SDF, blasted his

33. KAMÉ (2009: 78); <<http://allafrica.com/stories>>, February 28, 2008; *The Post*, March 3, 2008.

34. *Headlines*, March 3, 2008.

35. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

administration for the economic and social failures in the country. Leading members of the Biya's party fired back referring to SDF as desperate and an instigator of violence. Between the two leading political parties, the CPDM and SDF, they were charges and counter-charges, and blows and counter-blows, with each side claiming victory.

On Wednesday, February 27, President Paul Biya addressed the nation about the crisis. "Our country is witnessing a situation which brings back unpleasant memory", his address began. He forcefully condemned the destruction of both private and public property. Pointing a finger at his political opponents, he ridiculed them for hiding behind young people to "obtain through violence what they were unable to obtain through the normal functioning of democracy". He promised to crush them. Cameroon is a "constitutional state, and intends to remain so", he thundered. He ordered his security forces to work. Using Biya's warning as a pretext, people were tortured, raped, shot, and killed. And the violence intensified.

Public outrage to Biya's speech was immediate. The speech proved that he was out of touch with the realities taking place in the country, some said³⁶. From Buea, Kizito Mafanyi found Biya's speech to be "disgusting and arrogant". "The youths have had enough of this and enough of these insults. Watch out!" he added. From Douala, Augustine Tchameni denounced Biya's implication in his speech that the youths cannot think for themselves. He added that "Paul Biya's constant reproach of the Cameroonian people, like an abusive father, is beyond reprehensible. It is despicable. [...] Instead of placing the blame where it belongs, his administration's failed policies—he instead blames someone else for manipulating the youth [...]. President Biya must learn to talk to us with courtesy and respect. His arrogant, gangster attitude does not befit the style of many Cameroonians". From Bafoussam, Legima Doh reacted that it was a "shame for Biya to Express His Cowardice". "Whether he refers to them as men of darkness, delinquent or whatsoever", Doh wrote, "the truth remains that they have exercised patience beyond imagination." From Kumba, Kennedy Epie wrote: "The truth is that Cameroonians are fed up with his regime and we need a change"³⁷.

Other reactions came from all over, and even supporters of CPDM were at a loss for words when asked about the tone of Biya's response. People expected a more conciliatory tone, but Biya panicked and over-reacted. He missed an opportunity to present a more positive, and forward-looking policy to people during a time of maximum need. His approach to this crisis may become one of the significant blunders of his presidency. For whatever reason, Biya had not paid attention to the gathering storm. The transporters protest wasn't the cause of the strike. As Tazoacha Asonganyi

36. Interview in Cameroon, July 2008.

37. *The Post*, March 3, 2008.

summed: "There is pent up anger which can be summarized as no more corruption, no more power cuts, no more Biya, no more flawed elections, no more price hikes, no more joblessness [...]"³⁸.

However, the pro-government newspaper, *Cameroon Tribune*, hailed Biya's response in its editorial "*Paul Biya remet les pendules à l'heure*" ("Biya stepped in on time"). Biya's response was decisive and showed his leadership style, the paper stated. With the speech, the president restored calm to a worried nation, the paper added. The following day in another editorial "*Après la déclaration du chef de l'État*", *Cameroon Tribune* stated that the population welcomed Biya's speech, and increasingly called for an end to the strike³⁹.

On February 29, the leadership of the Beti-Bulu, Biya's ethnic group, issued the "*Déclaration de Forces vives du Mfoundi*", in support of Biya (Kamé 2009: 122-123). In the message they promised to defend Yaounde from foreign invaders. Biya was a "democratically and freely chosen" leader, and they will defend him, the document stated. In blunt language the document stated:

"Qu'il soit donc entendu que désormais, nous répondons aux coups par coups. À partir de maintenant, œil pour œil, dent pour dent [...]. En outre, nous invitons fermement tous les prédateurs venus d'ailleurs, de quitter rapidement ET définitivement notre sol. Car ILS n'y seront plus jamais en sécurité. Qu'ils disent à leurs commettants que les forces vives du Mfoundi ont de nouveau revêtu la tenue de combat de leurs ancêtres. Lesquels ont longtemps résisté à la pénétration européenne." ("Let it be known that we will return act for act. From now hence; an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth [...]. We are strongly requesting those forces of destruction from wherever, to immediately leave our land because it is no longer secure for them. That they should tell those who sent them that all the living forces of Mfoundi have donned the war gear of their ancestors who fought against Europeans")⁴⁰.

Signed by thirty people including the then government delegate of Yaounde, Gilbert Tsimi Evouna, the declaration was revealing. Cameroon is trapped in a dangerous alley of ethnic nationalism and Biya's leadership and policies have made it worse.

By the end of the first week of the protest most of the violence had subsided, and all concerned began to calculate their losses. Over a hundred people were killed, 1 671 arrested, and billions lost in destruction of property⁴¹. In the months following the protest, Cameroonian cities were virtually occupied by the military⁴². Arrests, torture, and imprisonment continued.

38. *The Post*, March 3, 2008.

39. *Cameroon Tribune*, February 28-29, 2008.

40. KAMÉ (2009: 122-123); *The Post*, March 7, 2008.

41. KAMÉ (2009: 15); *The Post*, March 10, 2008; 2008 Human Rights Report: Cameroon.

42. *The Herald*, March 5-6, 2008; 2008 Human Rights Report: Cameroon.

They were stories of rapes, people hiding under the bed, and outright terror⁴³. On April 10, 2008 the constitutional amendment to eliminate presidential term limits passed⁴⁴. Another amendment passed on that day guaranteed the president immunity from any acts committed during his tenure as president. It was a triumph for the administration. Despite the unrest, the administration achieved its goal to amend the constitution. As it has happened repeatedly in the past, the administration used the unrest to its advantage. It is no surprise some foreign dignitaries label Biya as “very smart and manipulative”⁴⁵.

In pure quantitative terms, the protest was a disaster for youths. No substantive gains were made. Biya used it as a pretext to strengthen his grip on the nation. Within months following the protest a new police and gendarmerie force known as *Bataillon d'intervention rapide* (BIR) was introduced in many of the urban centers in Cameroon. Though the general consensus is that BIR is to deter crime, the physical presence of armed men patrolling the streets is a warning to youths that if there is another protest, the response will be swift. The author was in Kumba on July 29, 2010 when BIR was formally installed in that city. Young people are terrified of BIR. “BIR broke some picken é hand for quartier today. They ask for é identity, the picken say, your mami—that people them bad [BIR has broken somebody’s arm in the neighborhood today. They asked for his identity and the young man responded by insulting their mother. Those people are dangerous]”, Derick informed the author on the evening of July 30.

The protest evaporated all lingering illusions that youths could play a vital role in shaping the political system in the country. For this particular generation of youths, the protest shattered their innocence. They learned what the previous generation had learned almost two decades ago. They experienced first hand the magnitude of the manipulative nature of the Biya regime. Now resigned to their fate, many have doubled efforts to leave the country.

Biya’s promise to recruit thousands of university graduates into the public service remains just another promise. With an already over bloated public service, an increasingly depreciating national budget, and the ever-watchful of the World Bank such pronouncements may never be realized. Despite the increase in salaries for civil servants, their pay is still below what it was before the massive pay reduction of 1993. Though Biya reduced duties on cement, and other goods such as oil, fish, and rice, the price of

43. Interviews in Cameroon, July 2008.

44. *The Post*, April 18, 2008.

45. Visit to US Embassy, Yaoundé, July 2010.

those commodities never went down. In short, the cost of living remains alarmingly high for most Cameroonians, and each day the economic situation deteriorates.

The protest confirmed that even in the midst of hopelessness and betrayal, Cameroonians commitment to securing freedom, hope, and human rights for their nation. They learned that if change had to come to Cameroon, it would be spearheaded by them. Despite the tragic images posted on the Internet, and coupled with all the noise from western nations about supporting democratic movements, western leaders didn't make a "peep" when young Cameroonians were being brutalized in the streets of Yaoundé, Douala, Kumba, and Bamenda. In fact, Nicolas Sarkozy has hailed the Biya regime as a "pole of moderation"⁴⁶.

An equally important revelation was the ever presence of the tyranny of ethnicity. After fifty years of independence, ethnic nationalism remains the gravest challenge to national integration and development; and Biya's strategy of promoting "the son and daughter of the soil" concept has only aggravated the problem⁴⁷. At the height of the protest the Beti-Bulu leadership invoked their right to a privileged position in the country. The leadership of Mfoundi issued a declaration vowing to use any means to kick out of Yaoundé, the nation's capital, the non-indigenes.

The protest and response was a grim reminder of what the abolitionist Frederick Douglass warned over a century ago. Speaking to an audience on August 4, 1 857 during a West Indies Emancipation day celebration speech he stated:

"If there is no struggle, there is no freedom [...]. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one [...] but it must be a struggle. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and this will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppose" (Foner 1950: 437).

Despite its global perception as a peaceful, postcolonial Cameroon remains a fragile and volatile nation. In February 2008 Cameroon's many flashpoints forced young people into the streets. Their actions confirmed that a rising tide for justice, reform, and human rights may be slowed but not reversed. Their composition confirmed that issues of economics and justice transcend ethnic political affiliations; and therefore raise questions about the way in which academicians have generally portrayed group identity in their studies. Studies of the "politics of belonging" have often emphasized ethnic identity (Page *et al.* 2010). It is a phenomenon that deserves to be more fully studied in African societies. The fact that youths

46. *New York Times*, November 13, 2009.

47. MBEMBE (2001: 23); Interviews in Cameroon, 2007.

who belong to Bet-Bulu ethnic group joined the protest along with those from other ethnic groups in Cameroon was unprecedented.

The protest raised awareness to the urgent political, economic and social problems of the day. The youths who demonstrated spoke and acted for the larger Cameroonian society; and in that sense, the protest was a success. They may have failed to reverse the drive to amend the constitution, but their actions showed that Biya's control of Cameroon is not total, and has never been. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the protest, the events of February 2008 kept alive the spirit of activism which is so much an integral part of the history of youths in post-colonial Cameroon, and Africa as a whole.

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ABSTRACT

Based on extensive interviews in Cameroon and other forms of primary and secondary sources, this article argues that the role of youths in the protest of February 2008 in Cameroon was important. Far from being just another reaction in response to the rising cost of food or the result of nefarious political efforts of Biya's opposition, the events of 2008—and the role of youth in these events—are deeply rooted in the nation's post-colonial history. The grievances expressed by youths were symbolic of larger societal problems. The protest showed a pattern of continuous youth involvement in Cameroon's political arena. It is hoped that this study will add to the growing literature of youth activism in Cameroon, and Africa as a whole.

RÉSUMÉ

Jeunes du Cameroun et protestation de février 2008. — Basé sur des entretiens et sur des sources de première ou de seconde main au Cameroun, cet article montre l'importance du rôle des jeunes dans la protestation de février 2008 au Cameroun. Loin d'être seulement une réaction à l'augmentation du coût de la nourriture et le résultat des efforts politiques néfastes de Biya envers l'opposition, les événements de 2008 — et le rôle qu'y jouent les jeunes — trouvent leur origine dans l'histoire postcoloniale de la nation. Les doléances des jeunes symbolisèrent des problèmes sociétaux plus larges. La protestation a montré l'implication de la jeunesse dans l'arène politique camerounaise. L'ambition de cet article est de participer à la littérature de plus en plus importante concernant le militantisme des jeunes au Cameroun et plus généralement en Afrique.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Cameroon, Paul Biya, Mboua Massock, Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), Social Democratic Front (SDF), bendskin, feyman, history, okada, protest, scammer, youth/Cameroun, Paul Biya, Mboua Massock, Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), Social Democratic Front (SDF), bendskin, feyman, histoire, okada, protestation, jeunesse.