Democracy, Governance and Civic Participation

Youth Involvement in Civil Society in Cameroon since 1990

Jude Fokwang

Abstract
This article explores the ways in which young people have challenged their exclusion from formal socio-political processes in Cameroon. It contends that young people have created alternative sites of engagement through associational life where their anxieties, aspirations and imaginings of civic involvement are developed and articulated. Their involvement in civil society is analysed from the perspective of the positioned self, that is, as social actors whose abilities to act are dependent on different times and spaces. In other words, young people are acknowledged as conspicuous social actors imbued with agency, which is dependent on changing context and periods. The argument is also put forward that their involvement in civil society, structured as they are by shifting contexts, results in redefinitions of ‘youth’.

Keywords: Bamendo; Cameroon youth groups; civil society; democratisation; PRESBY; university students in Cameroon

Introduction
The notion of youth is misleading partly because it tends to convey the idea that it represents a transhistorical and transcultural category. Anthropologists have argued that the concept of youth is not universal in range or nature but that ‘the cultural meanings and social attributes ascribed to “youth” vary.’ This

---

Jude Fokwang holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Toronto, Canada. He recently completed a dissertation on youth identities and association life in Cameroon, and has published extensively on youth-related issues in Cameroon. jude.fokwang@utoronto.ca.
Youth Involvement in Civil Society in Cameroon since 1990

This article understands and articulates the notion of youth as a social category constructed differently across time and space. It eschews the narrow definition championed by the United Nations (UN) and many states, which describe youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24. On the contrary, this article advances youth as a social concept, which defines the particular way human beings see themselves and others at a particular point in their lives.

Thus, it needs to be emphasised that youth does not depend on actual physiological development so much as on cultural factors, which vary from society to society and from age to age.

In many African societies, for example, one is considered a youth as long as one does not have authority to make decisions for oneself or on behalf of others, is not married, or unable to establish a separate household from that of one’s parents. These notions are not fixed, but are shaped by context and time.

The UN estimates that Cameroon’s youth population is about 20 per cent, based on an age definition of youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24. This claim is misleading, precisely because it contradicts current and widely held perceptions that young people make up more than 50 per cent of Africa’s population, an assertion that is probably verifiable in Cameroon. Moreover, the country has a population growth rate of about 2.41 per cent.

Taking Cameroon as a case study, this article examines the changing patterns of young peoples’ involvement in civil society since 1990 to the present. In this regard, it explores the ways in which young people have challenged their marginalisation in the public sphere, and argues that they have responded to their exclusion by imagining and creating alternative sites of action where their own agenda, anxieties and aspirations are articulated. This trend is also marked by a gradual retreat in civic engagement from the national landscape to more local forms of organisation. A study of young peoples’ civic involvement has broad implications for appreciating social transformation, specifically because young people are undoubtedly ‘positioned at the leading edge of many aspects of contemporary social change, and experience acutely the risks and opportunities that new social conditions entail’.

This article draws on secondary and ethnographic data from ongoing research in Cameroon (which is part of a broader project) that examines urban youth subjectivities. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Review Board of the University of Toronto, Canada. The first section is based almost entirely on secondary sources (newspapers and archival materials), while the second section draws on fieldwork using anthropological methods of observation, recording of field notes and in-depth interviews. In this regard, the study identifies several formal youth groups whose involvement in civil society are analysed against the backdrop of the socio-economic and political crises that have beset the country since political liberalisation in 1990. These organisations include the student unions of the former University of Yaounde (Parliament and Auto-defense), President Biya’s Youth (PRESBY), Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL) and the Ntambag Brothers Association (NBA). These groups, varied as they are in objectives and strategy, tend to share a common thread, of a search for recognition as social actors who represent or embody what Filip de Boeck...
and Alcinda Honwana have described as an “emerging influence in Africa”. In this light, youth agency will be analysed from the perspective of the positioned self, that is, as conspicuous social actors, imbued with agency, whose abilities to act are dependent on changing context and periods.

The Postcolonial Youth in Africa

In many African countries, independence from the yoke of colonial rule ushered in a new era of optimism founded on the predictable dreams of nation building and economic prosperity. At the heart of these lofty dreams was the youth, partly because ‘youth’ is often associated with the ‘future’, but more so because an increasing number of young people who acquired formal Western education were perceived as occupying a unique position to speak the language of universal human rights and, at the same time, draw on their African cultures. In brief, young people embodied the hope and prosperity of Africa, which had recently emerged from centuries of foreign domination and exploitation. A cursory look at the role of youth movements in the anti-colonial struggles in many regions of the African continent reveals that Africa’s hope in its youth was not ill-founded. In fact, the anti-colonial machinery was driven predominantly by activists who identified themselves as young people in collaboration with elders. In Cameroon for instance, the Jeunesse Camerounaise Française (Jeucafra), founded in 1938, and the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL), founded in 1948 in the former French Cameroon and British Southern Cameroons, respectively, played prominent roles in the struggle for independence.

Zanzibar’s experience provides a somewhat unique but similar trend witnessed in many African countries during the early postcolonial period. In his article, “Remembering youth: Generation in revolutionary Zanzibar”, Thomas Burgess explores the dynamics in which youth and generation emerged as strategic categories following the revolution that brought the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) to power in the early 1960s. Burgess demonstrates government leaders’ construction of ‘youth’ and how citizens were encouraged to think of themselves as the youth. Youth in this case was hardly understood as an age category. It was associated with ‘discipline’, ‘volunteerism’ and ‘obedience’ to Zanzibar’s political elders. Clearly, a reading of Burgess reveals the claim that the idea of youth was, in many respects, created by the ruling class in Zanzibar in their attempt to ‘reconfigure local identities’ along party ideology.

The example from Zanzibar echoes the experiences of many African countries where youth-wings of ruling parties (especially during the one-party era) played prominent roles in mobilising the masses along party ideology. It was in this context that young people were taught their role and responsibilities in the nation-building process and called upon to contribute their quota towards this ambitious initiative. This trend was often not coherent. In Cameroon, for example, the 1960s and 1970s were periods that witnessed the marginalisation of youth from formal politics as their activities became
restricted to the realms of religion, culture, and to a limited extent, student associations.  

By the mid 1980s, the optimism that had characterised the early postcolonial era turned sour. The disappearance of what Andy Furlong has termed ‘old predictabilities’ marked by graduation from school to the job market became symptomatic of the emerging economic crisis which exacerbated palpably what today is known as the ‘crisis of youth’. The crisis of youth is reflected in the growing uncertainties that characterise the lives of many young people, coupled with high levels of unemployment which, in 2003, reached an all-time global high of 186 million.  

The crisis of youth in Africa appears to be comparable on a continental scale. The civil strife that led to the near collapse of some states, and the drastic effects of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – World Bank initiative – the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) – entailed even more disillusionment for a growing proportion of young Africans. In his study of the condition of young people in the 1980s, Donald Cruise O’Brien observed that from South Africa to Kenya, the horn of Africa, in Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the socio-economic conditions of young people were bleak. In several West African countries, he noted that a common denominator shared by most young people was that they had finished schooling, did not have employment in the formal sector and were unable to set up independent households. These circumstances led many commentators to describe the young people of the 1970s and 1980s as the ‘lost generation’ in contrast to those who had come of age at independence and upon whom immeasurable hope was bestowed.

One significant impact of the SAP initiative was its drastic effect on higher education in many African countries and, consequently, its effect on a large proportion of young people. In Cameroon and Kenya, for instance, tuition fees were introduced in universities where none had existed before. In Cameroon, students had previously received regular financial grants from the government in proportion to their academic performance, but these awards came to an end in 1992 following drastic reforms in the higher education system. These led not only to the introduction of tuition, but also the withdrawal of financial assistance to students. While this caused considerable drop-out of students from university, it also provoked massive strike actions from the student constituency which often led to violent confrontation with the forces of law and order, and sometimes resulted in deaths. Thus, access to education became a site of struggle for many young people. These struggles tended to be incorporated with other interests, such as the popular demand for the liberalisation of political space in the early 1990s and for the departure of old political actors who were seen as having spent their political legitimacy. In this vein, there was already a growing feeling of disenchantment on the continent with leaders who had come to power in the 1960s and were unprepared to hand over to a younger generation, despite the banal discourse which acknowledged young people as ‘the leaders of tomorrow’.

These observations constitute, in brief, some of the challenges that confront postcolonial African youth. A careful reading of the postcolonial condition in Africa
reveals that a similar predicament that beset the so-called lost generation of the 1970s and 1980s still holds sway today, undeniably on a more acute scale. How have young people dealt with the problems that confront them and what implications do their actions have for their identity and agency? In other words, what sites of civil society are young people involved in and how does one make sense of their involvement? First, it is essential to provide a brief contextual background to Cameroon and the issues that preoccupy or warrant the intervention of civil society actors.

**Cameroon: A Brief Socio-political Background (1960–1990)**

Cameroon (Kamerun) was initially a German colony (1884–1916) but was divided into two distinct portions, between Britain and France, following Germany’s defeat in World War I. These separate portions, the British Cameroons and French Cameroon, became trust territories of the United Nations (UN), administered by Britain and France respectively. On 1 January 1960, the French-administered territory obtained its independence and became known as the Republic of Cameroon and on 1 October 1961, the British administered territory, known as the British Southern Cameroon, opted in a UN-sponsored plebiscite to attain its independence by joining the already independent Republic of Cameroon. In consequence, a two-state Federal Republic, (West Cameroon, formerly British Southern Cameroon and East Cameroon, formerly French Cameroon) was established with as its first president Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Muslim from the north of French-speaking Cameroon.

Ahmadou Ahidjo provided the ideological rhetoric for a strong, centralised and unitary state by proposing the dissolution of political parties in West Cameroon to form a single-party state. He achieved this in 1966 following the emergence of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) as the sole legal party in the Federal Republic. This was soon followed by the abolition of the federal structure in May 1972 and replaced by a unitary state known as the United Republic of Cameroon. Ahidjo voluntarily resigned in 1982 and appointed Paul Biya, Prime Minister since 1975, as his successor. Although Ahidjo retained the position of chairperson of the state party, he apparently developed nostalgia for power and sought unsuccessfully to amend the constitution whereby the state would be subjected to, or made an instrument of, party-defined policy. In April 1984, a coup d’etat, led by presidential guards mostly from Ahidjo’s northern region failed in what was popularly believed to be Ahidjo’s desperate attempt to come back to office. The failed coup provided enough reason for Paul Biya to purge his regime of Ahidjo’s leftovers, thus establishing a new configuration in Cameroon’s political order. Biya renamed the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon (the name borne by the former East Cameroon). In March 1985 Biya replaced the CNU with a new party, the Cameroon Peoples’ Democratic Movement (CPDM). This was interpreted as Biya’s final purge of Ahidjo’s remnants and the consolidation of, what he termed, a New Deal government. Biya’s consolidation and dominance of the new single
party simultaneously saw the emergence of a bureaucratic elite from his ethnic group, the Beti, found in the Centre, South and Eastern provinces of Cameroon.

A few years after Biya’s rise to power, Cameroon witnessed a reversal of its economic growth that had depended much on oil revenue. Economic decline strengthened the resort to ethno-regional politics (or what some have derisively referred to as ‘clan politics’), pitting elites against one another in a struggle over diminishing state resources. Widespread corruption also exacerbated prevailing economic conditions, thereby diminishing remote prospects of an economic recovery. Unemployment rates rose from 30 to 35 per cent in 1987 and to 40 to 45 per cent in 1988. With declining conditions of material subsistence, the legitimacy of the authoritarian state was greatly eroded and a growing sense of dissent began to dominate the public imagination. It was against this background that the clamour for political liberalisation gained momentum. In May 1990, Cameroon’s first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), was launched in the anglophone city of Bamenda amidst tight security. Six young people were shot in cold blood by state security forces at this historic event, although the official media reported that the victims were trampled upon by the massive crowd that had turned out to witness the launch. The fact that six young people were martyred for the seed of ‘democracy’ to be sown, became symbolic of the fresh hope for a promising Cameroon, reminiscent of the 1960s when the euphoria of independence and liberation provided optimism to many. The launch of the first opposition party set the ball rolling, particularly as additional civil society activists and opponents of the authoritarian state became even more emboldened in the struggle for the reconfiguration of the state.

Thus, the early 1990s in Cameroon, like in other parts of Africa, marked a turning point in the socio-political life of the country, evidenced by the collapse of the one-party state and the reintroduction of political pluralism. This period also witnessed what some have described as the dramatic eruption of young people into the public sphere, apparent in young peoples’ growing participation in party politics, strike campaigns and other civil society activities. Indeed, this era saw the expansion of youth involvement in public affairs beyond the religious and cultural domains, although the euphoria provoked by this new-found liberation soon gave way to disaffection, partly due to the slow pace of democratisation and young peoples’ exclusion from formal socio-political processes.

The analysis of political transition in Cameroon has often neglected the roles of young people and women during this process. It is therefore crucial to highlight the role young people played in this struggle, particularly the kinds of spaces or sites in which their agencies were deployed. For instance, the University of Yaounde, Cameroon’s lone state university at the time, became a potent site where dissent found fertile ground. University students gradually tied their demands for more favourable higher education reforms with the democratisation of political space. The winds of change that were blowing across the country were powerful enough to provoke considerable political reforms. For example, in December 1990, the government proceeded to liberalise political space by enacting new laws, which came to be known as the ‘liberty laws’.
These new laws granted, among other things, the freedom of association and movement, the creation of alternative press organs and political parties. Political liberalisation thus created space for the articulation of perceived or actual injustices by individuals, groups and communities who had opted for silence during the authoritarian era.28 However, these reforms were only skin deep, leaving the form of the authoritarian state more or less intact. To push for more reforms, members of civil society rallied around certain causes and spaces, of which the focal point became known as the ‘ghost town campaign’.29 The ghost town operation brought together opposition parties, various civic organisations and student movements who demanded a radical shift from the authoritarian state, beginning with the organisation of a Sovereign National Conference301 (SNC) – a sort of grand convention to which various political actors and interest groups were expected to dialogue on the future trajectory of the state. In June 1991, President Paul Biya, in a feverish appearance but firm statement, told Cameroonian that the demand for a national conference was pointless. Biya’s reluctance to introduce full-scale political reforms only heightened civil disobedience through the ‘ghost towns’ operation intended to bring the economy to its knees and compel Biya to succumb to popular pressure. In November 1991, Biya opted for a ‘Tripartite Conference’, a defective mimicry of the SNC, which yielded few dividends. Operating on the maxim that politics should be left to politicians and school to students, Biya excluded youth organisations from participating at the tripartite talks and subsequent socio-political debates to which they could contribute.

**Students’ Struggle for University Reforms and Further Political Liberalisation (1991–1992)**

One consequence of the limited political reforms was freedom of association, a freedom that young people embraced sooner than later. Indeed, as early as 1991, young people began to organise themselves into various lobby camps, occasionally with the help of elites. At the University of Yaoundé, two fiercely opposed student camps emerged, the Parlement and Auto-defense.31 The former consisted of individuals who advocated political liberalisation, the cancellation of tuition, the reintroduction of financial packages to students and lower prices for food on campus. The latter, which was an ethnic militia of students and thugs notably of Beti origin, claimed to support the incumbent president, Paul Biya. As an ethnic militia, Auto-defense purported to represent the interests of the Béti group of which President Paul Biya is a member as well as many government ministers and army generals.32 Its stated objective was to protect public property on the campus of the University of Yaounde (from the so-called vandals of the Parlement camp) although members of the regime employed it to counter the activities of the pro-democracy student movement on campus, notably the Parlement. Its membership consisted of students and thugs who tracked down, intimidated and brutalised pro-democracy activists.33 It is alleged that vicious confrontations between
the Parlement and Auto-defense led to the disappearance of dozens of Parlement members who supported opposition parties and radical civil society groups in the clamour for a sovereign national conference. It was further rumoured that the bodies of the disappeared Parlement members were buried in mass graves near the Sanaga River. A commission later set up by the government to investigate these allegations, chaired by Professor Augustine Kontchou, the then Minister of Communication, concluded that no one had been killed.34

The Role of Hawkers and ‘Strugglers’ in Civil Society

University students constituted just one camp of young people that were passionately engaged in civil society politics. In Douala, Cameroon’s biggest city and economic capital, young people galvanised their activities and energies around a popular singer, Lapiro de Mbanga, who was perceived at the time as the ‘incarnation of the hawker population’.35 Lapiro rose to the national limelight in the late 1980s and early 1990s, chiefly through his genre of protest music, which appealed favourably to the masses and particularly so among the youth. Lapiro articulated, in a unique way, the widespread despair and betrayed hopes of the hawker population and ordinary citizens who were victims of the country’s economic and political malaise. He eventually became a key reference principally in opposition circles and among the youth, particularly as his popularity is perceived to have increased due to his outspoken stance during the Monga-Njawe trials. These events threw Douala into immense tension, leading to an anthropology of anger as termed by Monga himself, pitting the sympathisers of the ruling party against members of the emergent opposition parties and civil society.36

The last-mentioned two were accused and charged with treason and contempt on the President’s person.37 Lapiro’s music recounted the lamentable experience of hunger, the excess of suffering, and invoked state authorities to remember the ‘petit peuple’ (ordinary citizens) each time they dined and wined. Lapiro voiced in a melodic but potent manner, the aspirations and lamentations of the masses against government authorities whom they accused of having plundered the state, rendering mothers (rémé) and children (njakat) emaciated and starved, comparable to the famished faces of Ethiopian women and children displayed on televisions the world over in the mid 1980s. He ridiculed the president’s request, which called on young people to return to rural areas to pursue agriculture. Lapiro, instead called on young people, whom he referred to as ‘sauveteurs’ or ‘strugglers’38, to resist such appeals and fight back for their rightful place in the city. Lapiro subsequently fell out of favour with the masses following allegations that government authorities had co-opted him with a bribe of 22 million CFA.39

It could be argued that Lapiro’s demise as a key civil society actor was symptomatic of a broader and virulent crisis, suggestive of the claim that Cameroon’s so-called political liberalisation was shallow, even cosmetic. This came to the fore when Cam-
eranians realised that the enthusiasm and momentum for change evidenced by the reintroduction of multi-party democracy was a short-lived experience. It petered out shortly after the presidential elections of October 1992 when the public was made to understand that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants. Besides the minimal political reforms introduced in the early 1990s, Cameroon has juggled between the ‘reversal to authoritarianism’ and ‘the difficult process of consolidation’; although it is evident to many that the country continues to suffer from what Jürg Martin Gabriel refers to as the ‘triple evils of excessive governance, bad governance and non-governance’.

President Biya’s Youths (PRESBY): Candidates for Elite Status

As noted earlier, the eruption of young people into the public sphere in the 1990s provoked a moral and civic panic, notably among older generations who saw in contemporary young people characteristics that contradicted the imagined moral order. Although young people asserted themselves in the democratisation process initially, their feelings of inclusion were short-lived when it became apparent that Cameroon’s political reforms were merely cosmetic. Against this background, young people began to imagine and create alternative sites for action where their own agenda, anxieties and aspirations could be articulated. In this perspective, one of the most popular youth organisations to emerge on the national scene was President Biya’s Youth popularly known as PRESBY, an organisation which emerged from the defunct ethnic militia, Auto-defense, discussed earlier. It claimed as its foremost objective, the recruitment of young people for active citizenship and as foot soldiers in defence of President Biya’s ideas of rigour and moralisation enunciated in his book, Communal Liberalism. According to unverifiable statistics, its national membership (as of 2001) stood at 120,000 including 7,900 officials.

Although PRESBY claims to be apolitical, in reality the organisation is affiliated to the ruling party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) and, in some provinces, its activities eclipsed those of the youth-wing of the party, the YCPDM. In 2003, disputes between leaders of PRESBY and the YCPDM in Kumba, a town in the South West Province, revealed the rivalry between the two in which the latter accused the former of trying to usurp its role in local political affairs. Members of PRESBY were expected sooner or later to procure CPDM membership cards and paraphernalia. The organisation also enjoyed wide support and patronage from CPDM elites nation-wide. For instance, a government elite in the South West Province is reported to have bought about 1,000 PRESBY membership cards for distribution among young people who had financial difficulties completing their registration formalities. Furthermore, the appointment of the PRESBY national president into the Central Committee of the CPDM, on account of his efforts in rallying young Cameroonians to support Biya’s regime, was obvious evidence of the patron–client bond between the ruling party and the youth movement. Members
Youth Involvement in Civil Society in Cameroon since 1990

Aspirations to elite status by youth associations are not novel aspects of youth involvement in civil society. In his study of youth identity in West Africa, Donald Cruise O’Brien observes that significant numbers of university students often see themselves as heroes and vanguard of democracy, but that their activities also tend to be ambivalent. He notes, like in Cameroon, that the majority of young people aspire to employment in the civil service and membership in the ruling class in view of achieving various kinds of social and political privileges. PRESBY members, many of whom were university students, fall within this characterization. These young people occupy positions of ambiguity because they perceive themselves as candidates for elite status but are also stigmatised for being unprincipled and pliant in their search for personal success and aggrandisement.

The Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL)

Another site of youth involvement in civil society is in the domain of what has come to be known as the anglophone problem in Cameroon. There is a prevailing notion that the former British colony known as the Southern Cameroons, which gained its independence in October 1961 by joining the already independent Republic of Cameroon, has had nothing but a raw deal from its union with the latter. This has led to increased demands, particularly after 1990, for the reconfiguration of state power and a return to the federal structure of the pre-1972 era. The government’s aversion towards anglophone demands has pushed some factions and activists towards more radical demands for a return to the statehood of the Southern Cameroons. The SCNC has consistently advocated against anglophone citizens’ participation in Cameroon’s political processes (e.g., dissuading anglophones from voting during municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections) and, more recently, appealing to the leadership of the SDF.
and traditional rulers to put their hands on deck in order to accelerate the struggle for Southern Cameroon’s independence. Anglophone activists have used political liberalisation to make a case, not only for their minority status in a francophone-dominated state but, also for the need to be treated as a distinct entity in a re-structured state. The government’s indifference and sometimes outright hostility towards the plight of the anglophone minority has pushed activists, and a growing number of young people, to re-imagine nationhood and their citizenship in a future anglophone state.51

Whereas the SCNC professes its motto to be the force of argument not the argument of force, the revived Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL) advocates the argument of force or armed struggle against the government of Cameroon as a strategy of accelerating self-determination for the anglophone territories. Impatient with the slow process of what has come to be known as ‘the struggle’, members of the SCYL have consistently argued that without the military option, anglophone Cameroonians will remain in bondage. Youth members of the SCNC are conspicuous during annual events, such as the 1 October celebration, which marks the day the Southern Cameroons attained its independence from Britain by joining the Republic of Cameroon. Young people are also spotted wearing ‘Free Southern Cameroon’s’ T-shirts during prominent occasions such as funerals of fallen members or heroes of the SCNC, and during sensitisation campaigns in the different regions of anglophone Cameroon. Recently, the SCYL is reported to have created a radio station, Radio Free Southern Cameroon (RFSC), which made its first broadcast from Buea on 30 October 2005.52 Whilst this incident provoked panic in government circles, it excited the anglophone populations particularly those of the North West Province where support for the SCNC is strongest. The government’s perplexity was aggravated by its inability to trace the location of the radio station and authorities responded by arresting prominent SCNC personalities and brutalising journalists whom they suspect of SCNC activism.53

The above indications notwithstanding, it should be noted that only a minority of young people are actively involved in the activities of the SCNC and, indeed, the SCYL; although there is widespread consciousness of the Anglophone problem and sympathy for the SCNC’s cause. In-depth interviews with citizens in Bamenda have revealed deep disenchantment with the status of anglophone Cameroonians particularly among the youth. They feel not only marginalised with regard to recruitment into the civil service but also because, without the substantial reconfiguration of the state, many fear that their citizenship will remain second-class on account of their minority status in a francophone-dominated country. A Bamenda resident in his letter to a local newspaper aptly captures the predicament of Cameroonian youth when he affirms that

the lot of young people in Cameroon today remains ever so distressing – massive unemployment, mental and psychological disorientation, frustration and accelerated aging. In spite of being highly educated and skilled and having the certainty and drive that builds progress, the youths are kept unused . . . In our towns, there is squalor and filth and deprivation because the same old mayors, the same old parliamentarians and politicians cling to power. We certainly cannot expect these megalomaniacs to lobby for
the initiation of youth-oriented programmes in their areas except the token ones aimed at boosting their shady images.54

These feelings of frustration and neglect are compounded by Cameroon’s slow progress to economic recovery despite claims (usually statistical) of steady growth (with a GDP of 4.8 per cent in 2004).55 The creation of a youth-orientated party in 2005 known as the Independent Party of Large Voters (IPLV)56 adds to the number of youth movements that focus on the plight of young people who constitute Cameroon’s numerical majority.

The Ntambag Brothers: Civic Action in the Neighbourhood

Old Town is a neighbourhood in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Province. Founded in 1919, it is the oldest settlement in Bamenda, or rather, the cradle of modern Bamenda. It is a neighbourhood of about 15,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are young, like in many other towns of Cameroon. Old Town is a highly concentrated urban settlement, characterised by widespread poverty, old and dilapidating houses and well known in town as a neighbourhood of deviant young people – namely sex workers, thieves, thugs and school drop-outs, to name a few. This notion, however, belies other realities of Old Town. It is also a neighbourhood of sundry and vibrant youth associations, working individually and collectively in building a better image of their community with respect to morality and citizenship. Since 1990 about 10 youth groups have surfaced in this community, although some of them became dysfunctional and have subsequently disappeared from the landscape. Today, Old Town counts about five active youth associations, each claiming to represent and articulate the concerns of young people, either to the municipal authorities or within the community itself. The flourishing of youth groups in Old Town, like in many other neighbourhoods of Bamenda, is one mechanism through which young people challenge their exclusion from formal socio-political and economic processes. Creating alternative sites in which young people engage in their own agenda, constitutes a crucial coping strategy within contexts of socio-economic crisis akin to Cameroon’s current experiences.

One of the youth groups that has contributed immensely towards civic participation in a rather distinct fashion is a one-year-old male-only group of 42 youths, known as the Ntambag Brothers Association (NBA). NBA initially emerged as an informal social group of young men in July 2004, with the specific focus of assisting its members in moments of crisis. Many youth associations, particularly the female groups in Old Town, have committed to the idea of looking after one another and offering material assistance in various ways to its members. In its bid for distinction, the NBA positioned itself as a development-orientated youth association – a vision initially championed by its leadership, but which eventually won general acclaim.57 Its difference in orientation, at least in principle, has become a key marker of identity for the association and its membership. ‘I think he was inspired to come up with this idea,’ one of the members told me, referring to the group’s leader who initiated the idea of
converting their meagre savings – known as ‘sinking funds’ to what they now refer to as ‘development funds’. The initiative initially met resistance with some members, but with time most of them were brought round to the leader’s convictions. ‘Many of us wanted to save in order to have a party. I was one of those who advocated strongly that our money should be used for an end-of-year party but when he and others explained to us, we came to reason with the president,’ the member revealed. Besides the pioneer members of the association, membership in NBA is attained, first by subjecting prospective individuals to a period of probation to ascertain their suitability for membership and, second, by paying the sum of FCFA 2 700 (about US$5), which goes to the ‘development fund’. The NBA now focuses its activities towards issues such as community hygiene and sport.

Group activities were mandatory for all members and failure to conform invited punitive sanctions such as the imposition of fines and at worst, suspension. The NBA began its activities by rallying members for clean-up operations in the neighbourhood. Wednesday mornings were generally devoted to this enterprise – commonly referred to as ‘work’. Members rose as early as 6:00 and assembled at the assigned location with brooms, wheelbarrows, machetes, and spades where they worked for about two hours and by 8:00 dispersed to their homes. Physical labour, such as the cleaning up of roads, footpaths and gutters was organised by two office holders known as organising secretaries charged with scouting for prospective locations where effective operations could be carried out. The NBA also organised campaigns to clean up the surroundings of government buildings in Old Town, much to the delight of the local authorities. Communal approval of NBA activities was demonstrated by financial support to the group during its campaigns.

Although the NBA gained popular support as a community association, it was hardly known beyond the confines of Old Town until recently, following their fabrication of 20 trashcans, which were donated to the Bamenda Urban Council for redistribution in Old Town and other neighbourhoods of Bamenda. ‘At the beginning, we conceived the issue of producing trashcans to help our community. We wanted to encourage hygiene around the area because our environment is always littered with garbage. We know that if garbage is well managed, we can avoid mosquitoes and consequently, have less malaria in the community,’ one of the key members of the NBA asserted. When the association first approached the council authorities with the idea, the latter had suggested instead that the NBA should repair several dozens of damaged garbage bins at the council premises. The NBA declined, on the grounds that it would be more costly for them, granting that they operated on little finances. Members then procured empty metal barrels, which they cut into cylindrical shapes and welded them to form trashcans. A formal ceremony, organised on the premises of Bamenda Urban Council (BUC) in appreciation of the NBA’s civic engagement, brought fame to the association’s cause. Today, trashcans bearing the name of NBA can be recognised in strategic spots in the neighbourhood.
Young Peoples’ Spaces and Agency in Cameroon

There is a flawed perception that young people in industrialised countries face entirely different problems from those in developing countries. According to this claim, young people in developed countries are preoccupied with questions of self-actualisation and the search for identity through sub-cultural activities, whereas their counterparts in developing countries are preoccupied with ‘basic survival from the threats of hunger, conflict and disease’. This view not only constructs a simplistic dichotomy akin to that of the haves and the have-nots, but it also presupposes that the problems of developing countries are limited to hunger, disease and conflict. This article argues that the concerns of young people in Cameroon have frequently been driven, not by hunger or disease, but by economic and socio-political issues that affect their lives in various ways. Cameroonian youth are faced with questions of access to education and employment, and have participated in diverse ways towards the struggle for greater political liberalisation. The quest for self-actualisation and identity formation are not the preserve of young people in developed countries, but constitute processes in which all social categories are implicated, irrespective of their geographical location, gender, class or race. Young people’s certainties and uncertainties are determined by the societies and economies in which they live, but they differ in the ways they address these issues. This article contends that as social actors, young people are agents whose participation in civil society are structured by the nature of the spaces and periods in which they find themselves. During these processes, the notion of what constitutes ‘youth’ becomes apparent, or rather renegotiated. In this respect, the ways in which young people have participated in various layers and structures of the state and society reveals, in a profound way, the character of the postcolonial state in Cameroon as well as the trends that have marked its evolution.

This article has argued that young people played a significant role during decolonisation and were constructed and perceived as the hope and future of Africa. However, in the 1960s and 1970s young peoples’ involvement was patterned along the notions of obedience, discipline and volunteerism. Thus, youth, who previously were perceived as a ‘highly desirable and powerful’ status, receded into the shadows of social and political minority.

In the 1990s, political liberalisation provided space for the articulation of perceived or actual injustices suffered by citizens during the authoritarian era. One of the social categories that had suffered exclusion prior to this era was the youth, often lumped with women as social minors. Since 1990, women and young people have made use of political liberalisation to voice their concerns through formal and informal socio-political activities. But an irony of this new context is the diverse ways youth is now constructed. According to Mamadou Diouf, youth is now perceived as a threat, following their ‘dramatic irruption’ into the public sphere in the 1990s. This allegedly irruption created moral and civic panic, which in turn attributes a negative character to the status of youth.
Despite this characterisation, youth associations have mushroomed throughout Cameroon since 1990. Whilst some have aligned themselves with the incumbent regime, others have forcefully opposed the culture of patronage, benign neglect and corruption that have characterised the leadership of President Paul Biya since his accession to office in 1982. The irruption of young people into the public sphere and their differential responses to the problems that beset them as a distinct category shed light on the structures that shape the contexts of their participation. Young peoples’ differential responses to their marginalisation make obvious the claim that civil society is not embodied in a single identifiable structure.62

The NBA’s articulation of its shared interests in developing its community by initiating hygiene campaigns illustrates the understanding of civil society as a space of uncoerced human association and relational networks formed for the sake of family, faith, interests and ideology.62 Young peoples’ activities, whether communal as in the case of the NBA, pro or anti-government as seen in Auto-defense and Parlement activ-ism respectively, tend to challenge their marginalisation from postcolonial institutions and spaces. A key finding, is that, although young people claim autonomy of some sort, the long and manipulative hands of elites are still perceptible in the shadows of young peoples’ engagement in civil society. Thus, the claim that insofar as young people are social agents, their actions can be analysed from the perspective of the ‘positioned self’ rather than simply as autonomous subjects acting on their whims. A challenge that remains to be understood, however, is how young peoples’ participation in civil society contributes in transforming their material conditions and how this accelerates their transition to adulthood.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) whose fellowship on African Youth in the Global Age in 2001 inspired my study of youth identities in Cameroon. My recent ethnographic fieldwork (2005–2006) on youth identities in Cameroon was accomplished through the financial assistance of the School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Many thanks to Lilian Ndangam Fokwang and the anonymous reviewers of Africa Insight for their pertinent comments on an earlier version of this article.

Notes and References

2 Ibid., p 23.
Youth Involvement in Civil Society in Cameroon since 1990


7 In 2003, the African Studies Association held its annual conference in Boston, MA, in the USA on the theme, “Youthful Africa in the 21st Century”. It suggested that “Africa is the most ‘youthful’ continent in the world, with approximately 50 per cent of its human population below the age of 18 years and a large proportion between the ages of 18 to 25 years” (African Studies Conference 2003).


10 A presidential decree, No. 92/074 of 13 April 1992 led to substantial revision in the number of universities in Cameroon. The University of Yaounde, which until 1992 had been the country’s only university, was divided into two, namely the University of Yaounde I, and the University of Yaounde II. What was formerly known as the University of Yaounde is today the University of Yaounde I.


12 D Durham, ‘Youth and the social imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2,’ Anthropological Quarterly 73, 2000, pp 113–120.


14 Refer to page 7 for more details of Cameroons background.


16 Young people were encouraged to create and/or belong to religious groups in order to protect their morality and cultivate respect for their political leaders (elders) as stipulated by various religious texts and precepts. Youth wings of tribal associations also thrived and older citizens participated actively in teaching younger generations about their respective cultures through youth organs of ethnic associations, particularly those based in urban centres.


18 Ibid. p133. The crisis of youth includes among other things, growing unemployment among young people on a worldwide scale and what has been termed the protraction of youth, witnessed by the increased length of time young people spend in school and as dependents of their parents.


23 The British Cameroons was further divided into two; British Northern Cameroon and British Southern Cameroon. During the plebiscite of 11 February 1961, the British Northern Cameroon voted to gain its independence by joining the Federal Republic of Nigeria whereas its southern counterpart opted to join the Francophone state, the Republic of Cameroon.


29 The Ghost Towns Operation was an attempt by various sectors of civil society to weaken the Biya government with the ultimate aim of seeking his resignation from office by undermining the national economy through sustained strike campaigns and boycott of economic activities. This period, which lasted about a year, was characterized by limited economic activities, especially in the economic capital, Douala where frequent strikes became the norm. The seaport in Douala was closed for a very long time. Shops and businesses operated only during weekends and the rest of the week was spent organizing protest marches, or sit-in strikes.

30 The sovereign national conference became a defining organisational principle in many Francophone countries whose objective was to carve out a new trajectory for a more democratic and liberal state. In some of the countries, it led to the ousting of incumbent presidents and the introduction of radical political reforms, which regrettably were short-lived.

31 Prof Jean Messi, a former rector of the University of Yaounde accepted the responsibility for creating Auto-Defense. However, he refuted accusations that it was an exclusively Beti organisation. He argued that its membership included individuals from other ethnic groups. ‘Let me remind you that in 1991/92 the leader of the auto-defense, Ngufack, was not a Beti. He was a Bamileke who was forced to fight against not only his Bamileke counterparts, but also against other Betis who were in the Parlement. So it is really not quite true that I have tribalised it even though a majority of the auto-defense are Betis.’ See The Herald, No. 588, Wednesday, 27–28 November 1996, p 9.

32 The CIA notes that in Cameroon ‘political power remains firmly in the hands of an ethnic oligarchy’ (cf. http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/cm.html). Also see Le
Youth Involvement in Civil Society in Cameroon since 1990

Messager No. 004, of Thursday 11 September 2003 in which the following facts are stated as illustrations of Beti hegemony in Cameroon. Out of 32 key ministers, 14 of them are from Biya’s ethnic group. Of the six state-appointed university presidents (rectors), 3 are from the above-named ethnic group. Of the 58 divisional prefects in Cameroon, 24 are from the same ethnic group, out of 24 generals, 15 share the same ethnic origin and of 21 ambassadors, 18 come from the same group, etc. Also see http://www.wagne.net/messager/messager/2003/10/1572/cameroun.htm, the online edition of Le Messager of 15 October 2003 for similar claims.


34 Augustine Kontchou eventually earned the nickname Zero Mort following his declaration that no student had died as a result of the conflicts.

35 Cameroon Tribune. Nº 1206 of June 2 1991, p 2


37 The latter two were accused of having reported on the ill-health of the president, deemed as contemptuous on the president’s person.

38 Sauveteurs included young men of various professions such as taxi men, truck pushers, hawkers and of course, the unemployed.


40 In the presidential elections of 1992, the incumbent, Paul Biya won 39.976 of the votes while the opposition candidates put together scored a total of 60.024 ‘showing that even according to official statistics, the majority of the electorate wanted a change of president’ (Nyamnjoh 1999:103).


46 See The Post, January 19, 2001 p 3

47 Ibid. 4.

48 See online edition of Cameroon Tribune of 20 December 2004, ‘President Biya’s Youths Seek Reconciliation’.


54 Emmanuel Ngu, ‘When will the youths be given a chance?’, *The Herald*, Friday 5–7 January 1996. p 4.


56 See Web edition of *Cameroon Tribune* of July 21 2005, ‘New Party to prepare youth for power’. The IPLV brings to 193 the number of political parties in Cameroon. Headed by 31-year old Enoga Sebastien Honoré, the party targets mostly youths.

57 The other social groups in Old Town are in the main, female groups which focus on self-help activities rather than on issues that have implications for the wider community. NBA wanted to be seen as different not only from the female groups, but also from its range of activities.


60 Diouf 2003
