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Assessing the impact of armed conflict on higher education in Cameroon's Anglophone regions

Ocena wpływu konfliktu zbrojnego na szkolnictwo wyższe w anglojęzycznych regionach Kamerunu

Abstract

Armed conflict is undoubtedly humanity's most devastating phenomenon. It halts development progress and stymies societal growth. This paper examines the impact of the armed conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions on higher education. Using an online survey to disentangle the impacts of separatist war on higher education in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, the paper focuses on the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda. According to 72.8 percent of the 47 students who responded to the study, 77.8 percent despise military presence on campuses since it makes the setting hazardous for lectures. As 83.3 percent of students say, this leads to campus closures on an irregular basis. Additionally, 23 students stated that their performance fell below 50% between 2016 and 2020, while 35 students expressed interest in moving to colleges in Francophone countries. The paper concludes that the separatist conflict has produced an unsafe learning environment for students at the two public colleges, hence impeding higher education.

Keywords: high education; armed conflict; Anglophone regions; Cameroon

Abstrakt

Konflikt zbrojny jest bez wątpienia najbardziej niszczycielskim zjawiskiem ludzkości. Zatrzymuje rozwój i hamuje wzrost społeczny. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wpływ konfliktu zbrojnego na szkolnictwo wyższe w anglojęzycznych regionach Kamerunu. Wykorzystując ankietę internetową celem oceny wpływu wojny separatystycznej na szkolnictwo wyższe na tym obszarze, skoncentrowano się na University of Buea i University of Bamenda. Według 72,8% z 47 studentów, którzy wzięli udział w badaniu, 77,8% gardzi obecnością wojskową na kampusach, ponieważ stwarza to zagrożenie dla wykładów. Jak twierdzi 83,3% studentów, prowadzi to do nieregularnego zamykania kampusów. Ponadto 23 studentów stwierdziło, że ich wyniki spadły poniżej 50% w latach 2016–2020, podczas gdy 35 studentów wyraziło zainteresowanie przeniesieniem się do kolegów w krajach frankofońskich. Artykuł podkreśla, że konflikt separatystyczny stworzył niebezpieczne środowisko uczenia się dla studentów w dwóch publicznych uczelniach, hamując w ten sposób szkolnictwo wyższe.

Słowa kluczowe: szkolnictwo wyższe; konflikt zbrojny; anglojęzyczne regiony; Kamerun

Introduction

On Tuesday, December 8, 2016, Akum Julius was killed in Bamenda, Cameroon's Northwest Region. Julius, a student at the University of Bamenda Department of Animal Production and Technology, became the first casualty of the current separatist war in Cameroon's Anglophone regions. Julius was one of several fatalities in elementary and secondary schools, universities, vocational colleges, and professional institutions in general, and specifically at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda, who died as a consequence of the separatist struggle. The armed conflict began in November 2016 with a strike by Cameroonian lawyers and educators of English-speaking origin who feel that the Anglophone legal and educational systems are being systematically uprooted by the Francophone-led government in Cameroon under the guise of a supposed harmonisation of the English and French legal and educational systems that have coexisted in the country. Lawyers, teachers, students, and the general Anglophone minority in Cameroon interpret the government's attempts at harmonisation over the years as part of the structural discrimination against the Anglophone minority since 1961.

Students at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda are frequently subjected to harassment, rape, abduction, unlawful detention, and torture as a result of the ongoing conflict between Cameroonian government troops and Anglophone separatist insurgents. This exposure of students to armed violence in Cameroon's Anglophone regions seems to validate Adebayo's (2018, p. 29) assertion that "armed conflict has a major impact on the present status of the educational development system in Africa". According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, isolation between ethnic and linguistic groups is often regarded as both a cause and effect of armed conflict on education in Africa (Smith, 2010). In the case of Anglophone Cameroon, a possible though contentious explanation would be the persistence of dominant political efforts that continue to discriminate against the Anglophone minority while attempting to demolish their much-loved Anglo-Saxon educational system. As argued by Noddings (2018) and Kecmanovic (2012), the concomitant consequences on Africa's very educational sector include physical damage to school infrastructure, displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, halting economic activity, and psychological distress, all of which are exacerbated by the prevalence of rapes, kidnappings, murders, lecture interruptions, and drop in school attendance.

Using the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda as case study, this article examines the consequences of the separatist war on higher education in Cameroon's Anglophone regions. The article begins by identifying the first fatality of the conflict, a student at the University of Bamenda. This is followed by a brief history of the conflict, its present status, and a theoretical foundation. Before presenting and evaluating the findings, the article proceeds by detailing the materials and methods, including the sample size and instruments used. The discussion section next

answers the research question, followed by a conclusion, practical implications, and a declaration of the study's significance/originality.

The separatist struggle in Cameroon's Anglophone regions has left the higher education system in chaos, impeding young men and women's professional and academic progress. The conflict is rooted in a history of social marginalisation and economic neglect among Cameroon's Anglophone minority. Since 1961, "pro-independence activists have argued that the territory's decolonisation process was insufficient, precipitating the present crisis" (Agwanda et al., 2020, p. 3). This is visible in attempts by the incumbent regime in Cameroon to submerge the Anglo-Saxon system of education practiced in the Anglophone regions, which is relative more attractive globally. The Cameroon government is also known for her neglect of investing educational infrastructure while at the same time interfering in the management of UB and Uba through the appointment of university authorities such as the vice chancellors, registrars, deans and heads of departments (Ngenge, 2020). At the moment, the unresolved Anglophone Question, based on historical and political evidence of more than 50 years of "marginalisation, discrimination, social exclusion, and struggled assimilation of the Anglophone speaking minority in Cameroon by the Francophone-dominated government, has plunged the Anglophone regions into a bloody armed conflict" (Ngam & Budi, 2021, p. 18f). One of the primary reasons for the violent conflict has been the Cameroonian government's interference with the Anglo-Saxon educational system and the Common Law system in Anglophone Cameroon. Ambe (2021, p. 23) summarises it as follows: "All changes since reunification have made the English system conform to the French system and never the reverse. Vital British examinations like Royal Society of Arts and City and Guilds were abolished. Competitive examinations into major national professional schools or recruitments are run by Francophones who may not know English".

Following civil strikes called by teachers and lawyers in protest of the government's efforts to integrate the English and French educational and judicial systems in Cameroon, the Anglophone areas saw an increase in violence, which has subsequently developed into a separatist war. Educational institutions such as the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda have been susceptible to arson attacks by purported separatist combatants, and sometimes as a result of fighting with government forces. These incidents frequently disrupt lectures and directly contribute to low attendance rates, which are caused by a climate of fear and insecurity. As a result, it is essential to evaluate the broad effects of the conflict on the students who are enrolled in higher education at the aforementioned colleges and universities. How, in a nutshell, does the conflict between separatists and government forces in Cameroon's Anglophone regions affect students attending the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda?

Theoretical framework

Smith (2004, p. 3) defines armed conflict as “open, armed clashes between two or more centrally organised parties, with continuity between the clashes, in disputes about power over government and territory”. To comprehend the implications of armed conflict on higher education in general and the educational sector in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions in particular, it is necessary to place the separatist struggle in a theoretical context. Gurr’s (1970) theory of relative deprivation offers a viable theoretical explanation for the Anglophone Question devolving into a separatist struggle. As Marium (2018) confirms, marginalised groups may serve as a forerunner to nationalist emotions and violent manifestations in the form of hostility and political violence on the part of the challenged group. This would be completely appropriate in Cameroon, given the marginalisation of the Anglophone minority. A failing decolonisation effort in the early 1960s seems to be the most credible explanation for the war. This produced a fundamental schism between Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon, which was exacerbated by a stereotype of the Anglophone regions being excluded from political, economic and social authority (Konings, 2009). The Ahidjo and Biya regimes’ concomitant repressive control to hold the Cameroonian state together encouraged an already existing separatist ideology. One of the key points of contention over the years has been the Francophone-led government’s destruction of the Anglo-Saxon system of education in Cameroon’s Anglophone areas. This would later be used by separatists to advance their agenda, including calling for school boycotts when the conflict began in 2016 as a sit-down strike and launching controversial arson attacks on educational institutions to enforce ghost towns and lockdowns to force the Cameroon government to release political prisoners and return to the negotiating table.

Materials and method

The study makes use of a random online survey as a quantitative research instrument to address “the repercussions of armed conflict on university education” due to its “relative flexibility, diverse applications, and benefits for researchers and participants alike” (Braun, 2020). Additionally, online surveys in educational research provide high response rates in instances when “participants have been influenced by or are interested in the study’s subject, survey format, communication methods, privacy and confidentiality guarantee” (Saleh & Bista, 2017). Additionally, the security risks associated with conventional data gathering methods such as face-to-face interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions favored online surveys in the context of this paper. To protect the participants’ identities, no personal identifiers such as names, emails, telephone numbers, or location were sought throughout the data gathering procedure. The online poll was confined to students who studied between 2016 and 2020 at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda. The timeframe was chosen based on when the conflict started and when it

reached its peak with strikes at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda campuses followed by government crackdowns. The average student population at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda is roughly 30,000, according to survey replies. The poll gathered data from 47 students chosen at random from students who attended the two universities between 2016 and 2020. Students in the survey were asked the following questions:

- Does the presence of Government forces on campus impair students' ability to concentrate on their studies?
- Have you considered abandoning your studies or postponing them due to the war?
- Is it safe to attend lectures on college campuses?
- Are campuses closed temporarily as a result of the armed conflict?
- Is there any evidence that the conflict has influenced students' overall performance?
- What is the current state of security?
- Have you considered enrolling in colleges located in Francophone areas because of the war?

The online survey was administered using Google Forms and published on networks such as WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter over four months, from November 2020 to March 2021. These social media sites, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, were selected due to their prominence and popularity in Cameroon. The poll excludes other private institutions, vocational colleges and professional schools functioning in the conflict-affected zone. This is neither because private educational institutions were unaffected by the armed war nor because they do not provide value to the research. On the contrary, the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda were chosen due to their public prominence as frequent targets and battlegrounds for clashes between Cameroonian government troops and Ambazonian separatists. The replies to the online survey questions are presented in synthetic order using histograms and pie charts, along with comprehensive analyses in the next section of this paper.

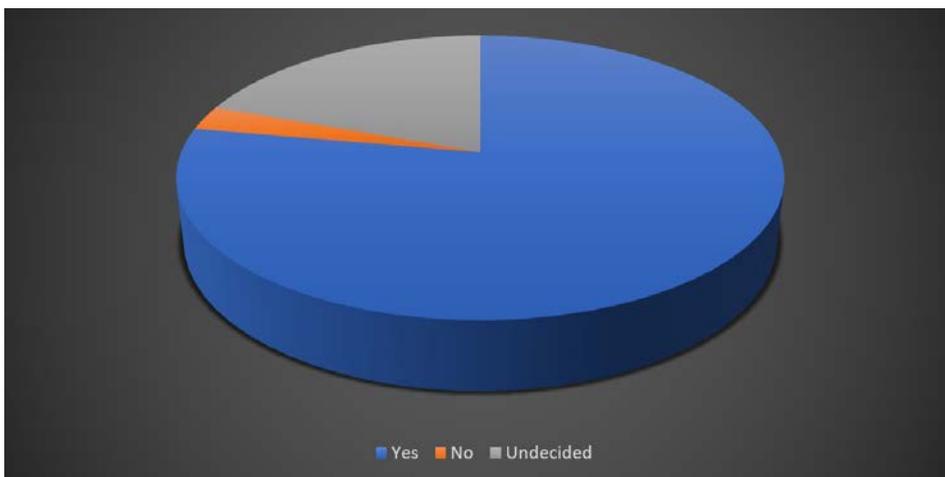
Results

The findings are based on the seven major questions included in the online survey. The questions tackle the presence of Cameroonian government troops on campuses, school dropouts, attendance of lectures and performances of students, the possibility of relocating to universities in Cameroon's Francophone regions for study. The data is presented in conjunction with interpretation and analysis. The discrepancies in the data are explained by the fact that some respondents did not respond to some of the questions included in the survey.

Presence of Government forces on campus

The first question was to find out whether the presence of Cameroon government forces on campus has affected students' academic attention. The following pie chart illustrates student responses.

Graph 1. Percentage of students who have difficulty concentrating due to the presence of military personnel on college campuses



Source: Own elaboration.

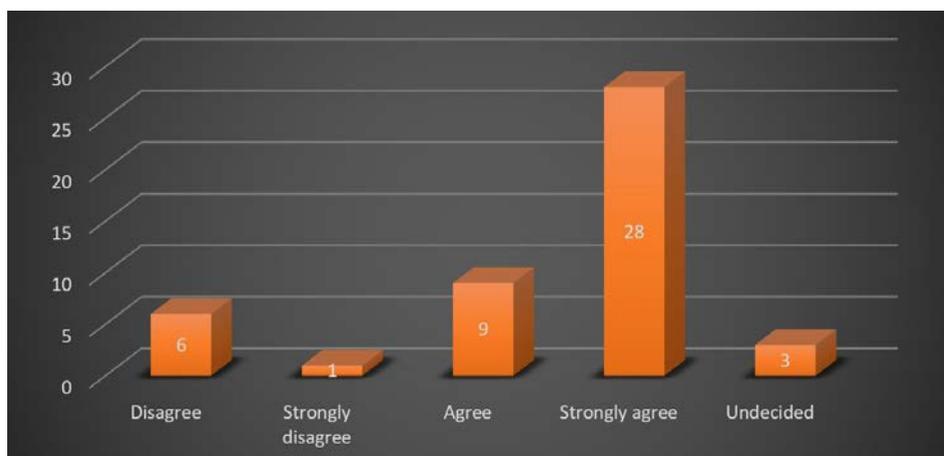
As illustrated in Graph 1, 77.8 percent of respondents agree that the heavy presence of Cameroonian government forces on the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda campuses impairs their ability to concentrate on their studies and consequently impairs their decision to attend school, attend lectures and even perform well in examinations. This is despite the fact that Cameroonian government forces are on campus to provide a secure and safe studying environment for students. The disgust for the presence of Cameroonian government forces on campuses may be explained by waning trust in military institutions such as the police, informed by a history of student harassment and brutality considered sympathetic to the Anglophone course, as Fongwa, Samuel & Godlove (2016) argue using the example of the University of Buea Students' Union (UBSU) under the chancellorship of Nalova Lyonga. A negligible 2.8 percent opted to remain silent on the matter, while 19.4 percent opposed to the premise that the presence of Cameroon government troops on campus affected their academic attention. This 19.4 percent are happy with the presence of Cameroonian government soldiers on campus to keep an eye on things and guard against any unanticipated assaults by separatist rebels. According to statistics from the Solidarity and Development Initiative (SODEI), around 15 University of Buea students were abducted on March 20, 2019, and a lecturer at

the University of Bamenda was killed on May 17, 2020 (Akame, Crockett, & Anoma, 2021, p. 23). Therefore, the presence of Cameroonian government troops at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda campuses is critical, even though it has proven detrimental in some cases, like the one cited above.

School dropout

To have a better understanding of the enrolment pattern, the researcher asked survey respondents if they contemplated dropping out of school or deferring their studies due to the separatist war. The data that follow provide insight into the students' responses.

Graph 2. Percentage of students considering quitting school due to the armed conflict



Source: Own elaboration.

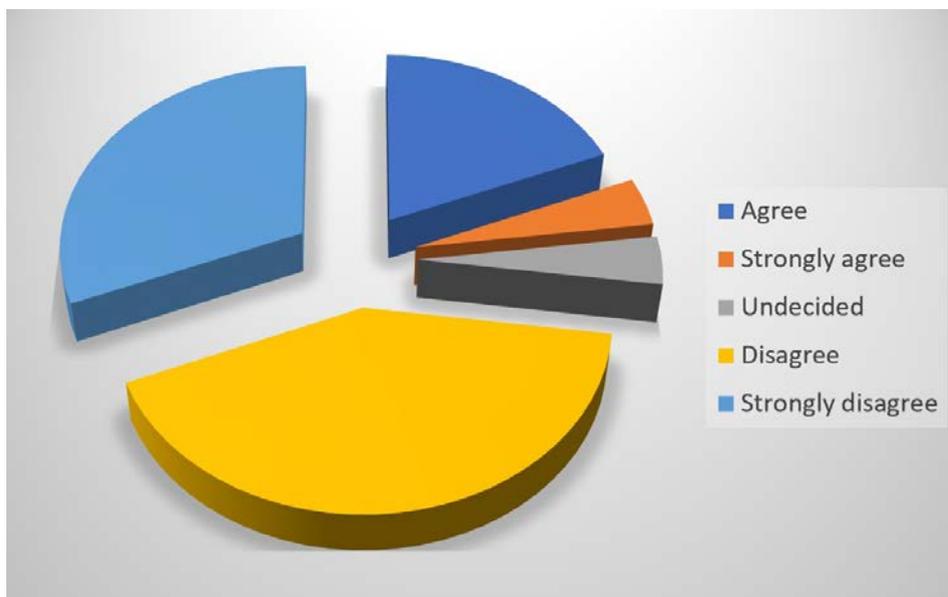
Since the crisis began and degenerated into an armed conflict, some students at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda have been forced to miss courses and others have discontinued their studies owing to widespread insecurity and persistent harassment by Cameroonian government troops and Ambazonian separatist fighters. According to the World Bank (2021, p. 38f), the separatist struggle has resulted in the absence of 238,826 and 86,696 primary and secondary school pupils, respectively, in the Anglophone areas. This kind of research on the conflict's effect on school enrolment reveals nothing about the situation at higher education institutions. As such, this paper serves as a forerunner to the conflict's influence on the higher education sector in Anglophone Cameroon from the perspective of a student. Numerous factors contribute to some students' choice to discontinue or interrupt their education. Fear of abduction, harassment, unlawful arrest, detention, and torture, as well as threats and contradictory signals from opposing parties, are only a few of the causes. Indeed, others have joined the ranks of Cameroon's government forces, separatist fighters, vigilante groups and armed gangs responsible for

a variety of crimes, including theft and beheadings. As seen in Graph 2, 28 respondents strongly agreed that they considered quitting school or stopping their studies while 9 agreed. 6 students, on the other hand, disagreed with this assertion, stating that they had continued to attend school despite the odds. 1 more also strongly disagreed that the conflict situation stopped her from going to school. Another 3 respondents expressed a preference for neutrality on this particular point.

Effectiveness of lectures amidst safety concerns

Due to the nature of the separatist struggle in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, schools have been vulnerable to violence. Students and teachers are often targeted in order to enforce the separatist leadership's demand for school boycotts as a tactic for forcing the Cameroon government to the negotiating table. As a result, even with the military on patrol, it is impossible to say if campuses are secure for lectures. To assess the degree to which campuses are safe for lectures, respondents were asked to score their level of comfort on a 5-point Likert scale.

Graph 3. Is it safe to attend lectures on university campuses?



Source: Own elaboration.

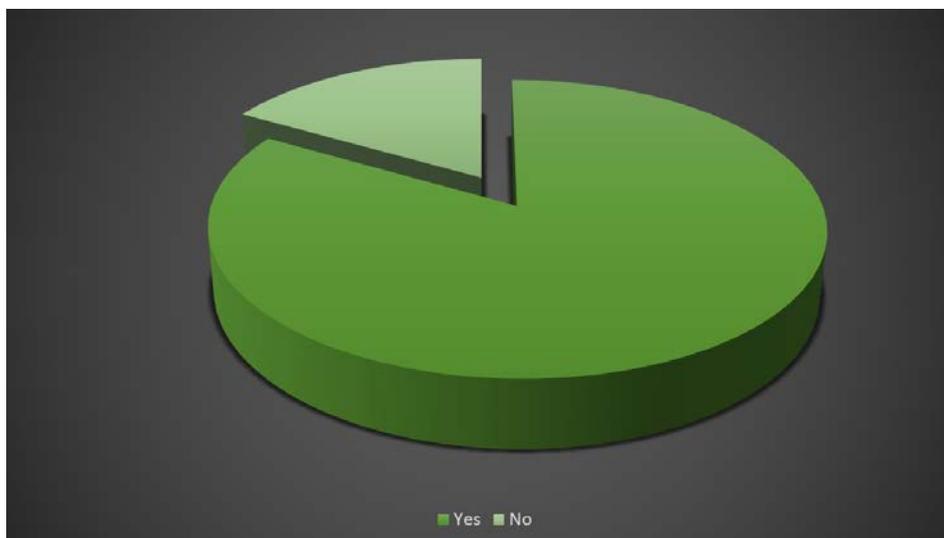
In terms of respondents' perceptions on how safe campuses are for lectures, 41.7 percent disagree and 31.3 percent strongly disagree that campuses are safe for studies. This is consistent with the replies in Graph 1, where the majority of respondents believed that the presence of government troops on campus posed a threat to their safety. In other words, such a presence is an invitation for Ambazonian

separatist combatants, transforming campuses into battlegrounds rather than safe havens for learning. 4.2 percent, on the other hand, chose not to reply to this question. In contrast to the 4.2 percent who strongly agree that colleges are secure for lectures, 18.8 percent support (agree) that campuses are safe for lectures, maybe because the massive presence of Cameroonian government troops deters other belligerent forces.

Intermittent closure of campuses

Students were asked to affirm or deny the assertion that the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda campuses had been closed intermittently since the unrest started and deteriorated into an armed conflict.

Graph 4. Percentage of students who agree or disagree that campuses had been closed at some time due to armed conflict



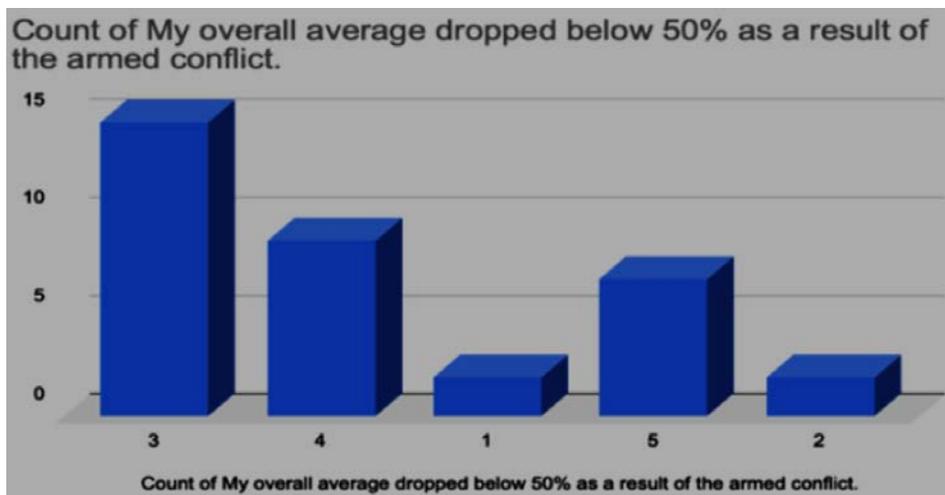
Source: Own elaboration.

Between the 'yes' and 'no' responses, 83.3 percent of respondents agree that their universities were closed at some point since the war began, while 16.7 percent disagree. The primary cause for these closures is widespread instability, which has resulted in ghost towns and lockdowns in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions since 2016. The conflict's intensity is illustrated by public universities like the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda's dread of ghost and lockdown days.

Student's Performances

Students' performance during the armed war is seen in Graph 5.

Graph 5. Student performance during the armed conflict



Source: Own elaboration.

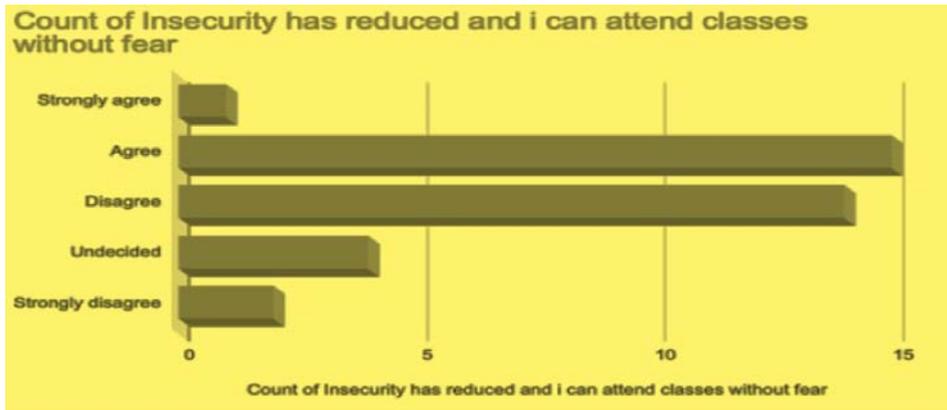
Another critical factor to consider was the students' performance. However, it should be noted that not all students who participated in the survey responded to this question. Some responders omitted the question on purpose or inadvertently. As illustrated by the graph, a total of 23 respondents strongly believe that the conflict has had an adverse effect on their overall performance on Continuous Assessment Tests (CATs) and final examinations, resulting in a decrease in their Cumulative Grade Point Averages (GPA). 10 respondents agreed as well. However, 1 respondent chose not to express an opinion, while 9 respondents strongly objected and argued that their performance did not fall below 50% between 2016 and 2020.

Current security situation

Students' perceptions of the security situation are shown in Graph 6.

In comparison to 2016, when the crisis began, and 2017, when it devolved into an armed conflict, respondents were asked if the security situation on university campuses has improved. As seen in Graph 6, 15 of the respondents feel that the security situation has significantly improved. 1 wholeheartedly agrees that campus security has improved significantly in recent years. 4 chose not to express an opinion on the matter, while 2 strongly disagree and more than 13 strongly disagree that the security situation is improving.

Graph 6. Student perception of the security situation

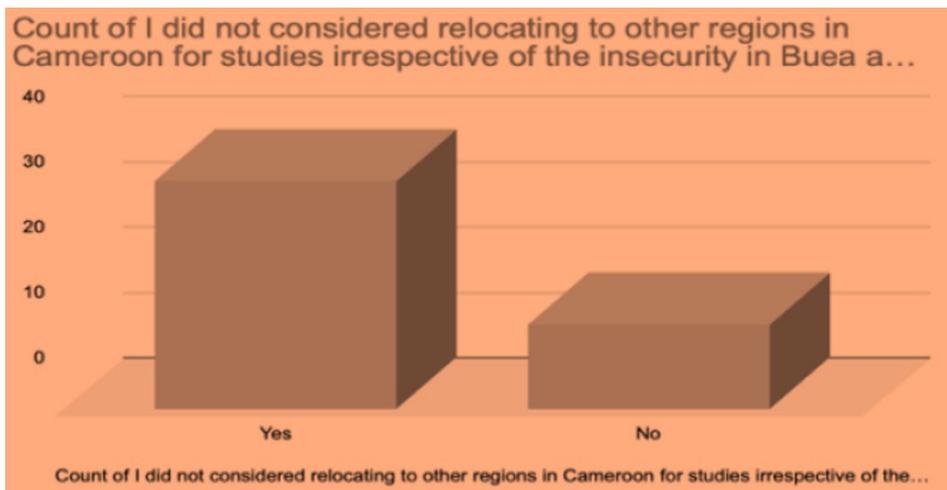


Source: Own elaboration.

Impact on local Migration

Students who considered transferring to universities in Francophone regions (Graph 7).

Graph 7. Consideration of transferring to universities in Francophone regions



Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 7 shows the number of students who have contemplated studying at institutions in Francophone regions since the crisis erupted. Over 30 respondents pondered relocating to Francophone areas in order to continue their studies in towns such as Dschang, Yaoundé, and Douala, which are home to the University of

Dschang, the University of Yaoundé I, the University of Yaoundé II, and the University of Douala, respectively. This might be seen as a reference to the security situation in universities in Cameroon's Anglophone regions. The distinguishing feature of the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda is their Anglo-Saxon heritage, in contrast to universities in other regions, which are either French- or bilingual-oriented and built of a system reminiscent of French colonial rule. Thus, it was critical to inquire if students contemplated transferring to other universities in other parts of Cameroon after the war began, even though slightly more than 10 percent of respondents opted to stay at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda. This demonstrates that the deciding factor in relocating was not the educational system, but rather the amount of insecurity prevalent in Anglophone regions.

Discussion

Students at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda are constantly at risk due to the security dynamics of the armed conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions. It is unsurprising that "the conflict's first victim was a University of Bamenda student", as Anglophone students are well-known for their role in the history of the Southern Cameroon/Ambazonian struggle (Abbink, 2005; Nyamnhoh & Akum, 2008; Anyefru, 2011; Chereji, 2012; Nyamnjoh & Konings, 2012; Musah, 2021). The bulk of Anglophone activists on the frontlines are students, academics and attorneys. This partially explains why the violent war now afflicting the Anglophone regions began with strikes by lawyers, teachers and students. Several of those recruited by the belligerents were once students at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda. Their frustration with the decline in educational quality at these institutions coupled with unemployment and acute poverty are some of the primary reasons why many of them continue to pick up arms.

The constant interruption of classes caused by skirmishes between Cameroon government forces and Ambazonian separatist fighters fosters anxiety among many students, preventing them from attending lectures. This is one of the causes for the decline in enrolment and the rise in interest in studying at universities in Francophone regions. On-campus insecurity has also affected students' performance. This is because overall uncertainty breeds dread and psychological anguish, which impairs students' ability to concentrate academically. Specific incidents in Cameroon's armed conflict are increasing fears among the student population at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda, as numerous students from these two universities have been murdered, kidnapped, arrested, tortured, harassed and imprisoned indiscriminately. Students face these threats regardless of whether they have committed a crime or not. With the current armed conflict far from settled, the future of effective education at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda, particularly in the Anglophone areas in general, remains uncertain.

The study's limitations include difficulties in obtaining responses from students and low survey participation. This might be a consequence of restricted Internet access caused by poor Internet connection and frequent power outages. Many also expressed concerns about their security, despite the researcher's promises that no personal information would be used in the presentation, analysis or interpretation of the data. This affected the survey's participation rate. The small sample size in comparison to the two universities' student population is an acceptable constraint, as a larger sample size including private universities, high schools and colleges could have produced different findings.

Conclusion

This article focused on the effects of armed conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, specifically on students at the University of Buea and the University of Bamenda. The use of a random online survey demonstrates that the conflict affects student performance, pushing many students to drop out. The surge in continual dread of arrests, torture, kidnappings, rapes and death lurks ominously over students at University of Buea and the University of Bamenda, creating an insecure and risky learning environment. The possibility of the situation ever-altering is contingent on the outcome of the present conflict.

The article is beneficial for many reasons, since it details the damage done to higher education in Cameroon's Anglophone regions. To begin, it will assist students in comprehending the stakes and adapting to a conflict atmosphere. Second, it will raise awareness and encourage combatants to exhibit restraint in order to allow students to attend lectures uninterrupted. Schools, for example, might be used as buffer zones between Cameroon's government forces and Anglophone rebel militants. Additionally, the article may be useful to international organisations such as the United Nations in their efforts to secure a ceasefire and bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. It equally serves as an evidence-based paper to justify the pressing need for international and local stakeholders to establish an effective mechanism for the protection of students and civilians in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon. In terms of originality, this is perhaps one of the first research papers to rely exclusively on online survey responses and to focus exclusively on the separatist war's implications on students at University of Buea and the University of Bamenda. This enables the reader to understand the conflict through the lens of a student's dilemma.

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