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# PRIVATISATION AND ETHNO-REGIONAL PROTEST IN CAMEROON

*Piet Konings*

## Introduction

Privatisation has become a key instrument in the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and the good governance agenda imposed on Africa by the Bretton Woods institutions and bilateral donors. It is an essential part of the overall neo-liberal reform package aimed at creating transparency and accountability in the management of national affairs as well as a favourable environment for opening up the Cameroonian economy to market forces and private-sector development.

Since public enterprises are considered to have performed dismally, African governments are under considerable pressure from international donors to sell them off to domestic and foreign private investors. Several authors, however, have observed that the actual number of privatisations has remained modest in Africa (cf. Bennell 1997; Tangri 1999; Van de Walle 2001). They point to various technical and financial constraints as well as to socio-political influences to explain this curious finding. Interestingly, some factors reflect the same political concerns that led to the creation of so many public enterprises in the years after independence: an inability to attract foreign investment to politically and economically unstable African nations, the absence of a well-developed domestic entrepreneurial class, and the pursuit of patron-client relationships by African 'neo-patrimonial' states. Some authors also highlight the resistance to privatisation by civil society, in particular by professional bodies, student organisations and trade unions, since privatisation often involves the sale of public property to well-placed nationals or to foreign enterprises, and generally results in massive lay-offs of workers (cf. Olukoshi 1998; Konings 2002).

Strikingly, in sharp contrast to the existing literature, international donors are inclined to blame almost exclusively the weak, predatory and neo-patrimonial African states for the poor performance of structural adjustment in general and public-sector reforms in particular and they stress the need not only for less but also for better government in Africa. By proclaiming that a 'crisis of governance' underlies 'the litany of Africa's development problems', the World Bank's 1989 report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* placed the concept of good governance at the heart of the donor agenda for Africa (World Bank 1989: 60).

But what is good governance and how is it to be promoted? The term remains rather vague. The World Bank (1992: 1) defines it in managerial terms as 'the manner in which power is exercised in the management of the country's economic and social resources for development'. Good governance was to flow from enhanced accountability within the public sector, transparency and openness in decision-making, the rule of law, and more efficient public management (Sandbrook 2000: 10-13). The bilateral donors, however, soon linked democracy to good governance. Although they continuously stressed that democratisation had its intrinsic merits, they undoubtedly saw it primarily as an instrument for promoting the more efficient implementation of structural adjustment measures. Democratisation was said to empower the electorate by providing it with mechanisms of a parliamentary and extra-parliamentary nature to check upon the ruling regime's neo-patrimonial practices and to participate in the

decision-making process about necessary structural adjustment measures. This would contribute to the legitimisation of unpopular neo-liberal reforms among the population.

Clearly, the good governance discourse, propagated by the donor community generally and the World Bank in particular, represents an instrumentalist, managerial and technocratic approach to development. It aims at promoting the emergence of a more conducive and, in their view, more legitimate political environment, backed by the requisite administrative capacity, for the successful implementation of orthodox structural adjustment (Olukoshi 1998: 35). This approach entails an essentially depoliticised notion of governance. In my study of privatisation in Cameroon, I argue instead that the good governance-structural adjustment linkage, though largely framed in managerial and technical terms, is highly political, being embedded in particular relations of power, and contested. Ironically, it often contradicts the liberal-democratic principles prescribed by bilateral donors.

Decisions about privatisation in Cameroon are taken by the Bretton Woods institutions and implemented after secret consultations with a small group of national technocrats representing the government. Power, in other words, is increasingly located outside the political community as conventionally defined by democratic theory, and beyond the reach of the democratic control of Cameroonian citizens (Abrahamsen 2000: 146-47). While the elected Cameroonian government has frequently tried to avoid, postpone, manipulate and dilute privatisations, which tend to further undermine the patronage networks on which its power continues to rest and the limited legitimacy it still enjoys among the electorate, its dependence on continued financial assistance has eventually led it to fall into line with the demands of its external constituency. Civil-society organisations in Cameroon that have either emerged or obtained a large measure of autonomy during political liberalisation are usually completely excluded from the decision-making process about neo-liberal reforms and have often displayed strong opposition to privatisation. Interestingly, in the absence of any powerful opposition parties in the Cameroonian democratic transition, newly created ethno-regional associations have come to serve as the new intermediaries between the state and the electorate (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands 1998; Kasfir 1998). Their leadership is determined to represent and defend ethno-regional interests during structural adjustment and often strives for a larger degree of ethno-regional autonomy and self-determination.

In this article I focus on the vehement resistance of ethno-regional associations to the government announcement on 15 July 1994 of the privatisation of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), a huge agro-industrial parastatal located in the coastal area of Anglophone Cameroon. These organisations perceived the announced privatisation of this important regional parastatal as a further step towards ethno-regional marginalisation.

### **Governance and Privatisation in Cameroon**

As in most other African countries (Grosch & Makandala 1994; Tangri 1999), the parastatal sector in Cameroon has grown rapidly since independence (Tedga 1990; Van de Walle 1994; Walker 1998). From a handful of public enterprises inherited from the British and French Trust Authorities at independence and reunification in 1961, the Cameroonian parastatal sector grew to 219 enterprises in the mid-1980s, employing approximately 100,000 people. Growth in public-sector ownership was the result of a series of economic and political factors, in particular statist conceptions of development, economic nationalism, and the need for political patronage (Tangri 1999: 19-22).

The 1960s was a period when 'statism' was a key feature of development thinking and strategy on the continent. The view that the state should be the prime motor of development was widely shared, and ownership and intervention by the state was accepted as the dominant development paradigm. State entrepreneurship was also strongly supported by western donors. For example, the enormous expansion of the Cameroonian agro-industrial parastatal sector in the post-colonial period was largely financed by the World Bank and other international financial institutions (Konings 1993: 26).

Public-sector expansion was also encouraged by the fact that, at independence, Africa's economies were characterised by a weak and subordinate indigenous private sector and foreign control. Most post-colonial governments tried to forestall the development of a national bourgeoisie, which they regarded as a potential political threat, and to reduce foreign dominance. Attaining greater ownership and control of the 'commanding heights of the economy' would enable them to influence the broad direction of national development. Subsequently, the parastatal sector came to be viewed as 'national patrimony' and its sale to foreigners was regarded negatively.

And, last but not least, state expansion afforded prebendal and patronage possibilities and was seen by the African political elite as a valuable mechanism in the consolidation and maintenance of political power. According to Van de Walle (1994: 155-56), public enterprises in Cameroon 'proved to be an ideal instrument to distribute state resources in the form of jobs, rents, power and prestige', enabling the president to reward allies and co-opt opponents, and thus 'secure his own power base'. A 'patrimonial logic' existed in many African post-colonial states (Chabal & Daloz 1999) but was particularly forceful in Cameroon, a country with stark ethno-regional cleavages (Mehler 1993; Nyamnjoh 1999; Gabriel 1999). State resources could be used to forge the ethno-regional alliances necessary for national unity and political stability and to obviate the need for coercion. The political importance of state-owned enterprises is evident from the fact that the Cameroonian government used to subsidise parastatal-sector losses to the tune of some FCFA 150 billion a year prior to the start of the economic crisis in the mid-1980s. Though many of Cameroon's oil revenues were initially kept in secret bank accounts abroad, their primary function soon became the covering of parastatal deficits.

By virtually any measure of economic performance, the record of state-owned concerns has proved disappointing. Although by no means uniformly negative in their performance, public enterprises have been judged inefficient and unprofitable. The Cameroonian government itself has regularly recognised the operating ineffectiveness of its parastatals but little noticeable improvement in public enterprises has occurred (Konings 1993: 27). Remarkably, the international financiers who made a major contribution to parastatal expansion failed to raise any serious alarm about the dismal performance of Cameroonian public enterprises for a long time. This may be explained by the fact that they, like others, were impressed by the general performance of the Cameroonian economy which was viewed as one of the rare success stories in Africa, registering a phenomenal growth rate of 6-7 per cent between 1970 and 1986 (Konings 1996). It was not until the unprecedented crisis in the Cameroonian economy in 1987 that the World Bank began to express its disillusionment with the performance of state enterprises (World Bank 1987). Subsequently, in 1988/89, the Bretton Woods institutions forced the reluctant Biya government to adopt an SAP, making privatisation a cornerstone of their lending conditions.

Privatisation intended to achieve at least three things. First, it would contribute to solving the problem of rising budgetary deficits and in the process also generate revenue that could be used to pay off government debts. With few exceptions, state-owned

enterprises had been operating at a loss. In 1984, they had operating losses of FCFA 65 billion, representing 1.5 per cent of GDP; the following year losses increased to FCFA 121 billion or 3 per cent of GDP. The situation continued to deteriorate. Between 1989 and 1994, state-owned enterprises accumulated debts of an additional FCFA 352 billion, bringing their total to over FCFA 750 billion or 22 per cent of GDP (Walker 1998: 263). Second, it would contribute to the depoliticisation of the economy through the dismantlement of state redistributive and welfare activities, which were lumped together as 'neo-patrimonial' or rent-seeking practices. These practices were held responsible for the various shortcomings of state-owned enterprises, in particular widespread corruption, political interference, political appointments, weak monitoring and overstaffing. Privatisation was thought to lead to greater transparency and accountability, to increase efficiency in the allocation of resources and to stimulate more economic competitiveness, all of which were expected to promote greater total factor productivity in the national economy. Third, it would contribute to the promotion of private enterprise and attract badly needed foreign capital. Generally speaking, privatisation could produce a desirable change in the balance of power between the state and the private sector.

Public-enterprise reform and private-sector development have been designed in the offices of the Bretton Woods institutions. Like other structural adjustment measures, they have been accepted by virtually all bilateral donors and presented to African governments as the only way forward to development and economic growth. Even since the Biya government was compelled in 1990 to introduce a certain measure of political liberalisation, including a multi-party system and a limited degree of freedom of press and association, there has been little local participation in the actual formulation of privatisation schemes. The degree of control exerted by donors and creditors, especially the Bretton Woods institutions, on these new democracies poses a challenge to key features of liberal democracy as commonly conceived in political theory in that it threatens to erode the right to national self-determination and self-government. Mkandawire (1999) has coined the term 'choiceless democracies' to refer to democracies where the fine-tuning of externally directed policies is the best that can be hoped for.

Remarkably, although donors are able to design and impose structural adjustment measures upon African governments, they appear to have less control over their actual implementation. There is considerable research and empirical evidence to suggest that African governments may sign documents initiating a privatisation programme without intending to ever execute it (Bennell 1997; Tangri 1999; Van de Walle 2001). For these government leaders, the need to continue financial assistance flows obliges acquiescence to donor demands but the realities of the domestic political economy limit what is politically feasible. Under these circumstances, a strategy of initial acceptance followed by delay and obstruction may be the most effective. Privatisation, in fact, represents a severe challenge to the neo-patrimonial logic of the Cameroonian regime which laid a solid foundation for co-opting the various ethno-regional elite factions into the 'hegemonic alliance' (Bayart 1979) and thus secures a considerable measure of political stability in the post-colonial state.

One of the defensive tactics of Cameroonian government leaders has been the attempt to privatise state corporations and put them in their cronies' hands (Hibou 1999). Similar to other African countries (cf. Tangri & Mwenda 2001), the privatisation process in Cameroon thus reinforced patterns of patron-client relations, which the exercise itself was supposed to eliminate. Little wonder then that the donors, including the World Bank, have recently expressed concerns about the politicisation of economic

reforms (World Bank 1997, 2000). Another tactic has been what Van de Walle (1993) has called 'the politics of non-reform'. In 1991, a World Bank mission provided an overview of the disappointing state of the Cameroonian government's efforts to reform and sell off state-owned enterprises: the delay in establishing government agencies to oversee the process, the government's reluctance to sell off anything but bankrupt or inconsequential enterprises, the in-fighting over which firms would be the first to be sold or liquidated, and the foot-dragging over issuing tenders and establishing the criteria by which bids would be evaluated (Walker 1998: 4). Again, in its 1994 report *Adjustment in Africa: Reforms, Results, and the Road Ahead*, the World Bank asserted that in the area of privatisation, little progress had been made in Cameroon. The report constantly rated Cameroon on the bottom rungs of economic policy and adjustment performance, and it pointed out that the IMF had signed and cancelled three successive stand-by agreements because of the government's failure to achieve negotiated targets (World Bank 1994).

The slow progress of the privatisation programme is clearly manifest in the actual number of privatisations that were executed between 1989 and 1996. To fulfill the terms of the structural adjustment loan negotiated between the Cameroonian government and the World Bank in 1989, the Cameroonian government completed an initial review of the parastatal sector over the following year, that culminated in a presidential decree in October 1990 designating an initial set of 15 enterprises (7 per cent of the total of 219) that were to be sold off. In July 1994, a second presidential decree added an additional 15 enterprises to the group destined for divestiture, most of them in the agro-industrial and transport sectors, including the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC). However, as of mid-1996 only 10 of the 30 enterprises on the divestiture list had actually been sold. Under mounting pressure from the Bretton Woods institutions, the Cameroonian government has displayed a firmer commitment to accelerate the privatisation process from 1997 onwards.

While African governments have often tried to postpone or dilute the imposed privatisation programmes, civil-society organisations have frequently opposed their implementation as being harmful to their members' interests and have demanded a voice in the decision-making process (Olukoshi 1998; Konings 2002). One of the privatisations in Cameroon that sparked off virulent opposition from ethno-regional associations and pressure groups was that of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), whose estates are located in the coastal area of Anglophone Cameroon.

### **Privatisation of the CDC and Ethno-Regional Opposition**

The CDC is one of the country's oldest enterprises (Ardener *et al.* 1960; Konings 1993) and its history is closely linked with the political and economic history of Anglophone Cameroon. It was founded in 1946 but its roots can be traced back to the German colonial period (1884-1916) when many large-scale private plantations were created on the fertile, volcanic soils around Mount Cameroon in the present South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon. The establishment of a plantation economy in the region led to the expulsion of the original occupants of the land, notably the Bakweri (Matute 1990; Ardener 1996), into prescribed native reserves. With the British occupation in 1914/15, the property of German planters was confiscated and turned over to the Custodian of Enemy Property. By 1922, however, the British Mandate Authority had already decided to get rid of them, as the administrative costs of maintaining them were said to be prohibitive. It then seriously considered returning the plantation lands to the

original owners but dropped the idea in the end. Instead, it came to the conclusion that it would be in the best interests of the territory and its inhabitants to put the plantations back in the hands of foreign private enterprise. At an auction held in London in November 1924, almost all the estates were bought back by their former German owners.

At the start of the Second World War, the German estates were again expropriated by the Custodian of Enemy Property. After the war, a decision had to be reached, once again, on how to dispose of the properties. The Bakweri chiefs and educated elite, organised in the so-called Bakweri Land Committee (BLC), immediately began agitating for the return of their ancestral lands. The BLC sent several petitions, first to the British Crown and subsequently to the United Nations, as Britain had assumed responsibility for the territory, the so-called Southern Cameroons, under United Nations Trusteeship after the war. However, after considerable deliberations, the British Trusteeship Authority declined once again to surrender the ex-German plantation lands to their original owners (Molua 1985; Konings 1993). Instead, it announced in November 1946 that they would be leased to a newly established statutory corporation, the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC).

The corporation came into being with the passage of two ordinances in December 1946. The first ordinance, the Ex-Enemy Lands (Cameroons) Ordinance no. 38 (1946), provided for the acquisition of the ex-German plantation lands which had been vested in the Custodian of Enemy Property for the duration of the Second World War. Under the terms of this ordinance, the governor of Nigeria, who was responsible for the administration of the Southern Cameroons, was to declare them 'native lands' and hold them in trust for the common benefit of all the inhabitants of the territory. The second ordinance, the Cameroons Development Corporation Ordinance no. 39 (1946), provided for the setting up of the corporation. All the lands acquired by the governor under the first ordinance were to be leased to this corporation for a period of sixty years. Significantly, the corporation was charged with a double responsibility: it was to develop and manage the approximately 104,000 hectares of estate lands in the interests of the people of the Trust Territory, and to provide for the spiritual, educational and social welfare of its employees.

The CDC is still the largest agro-industrial parastatal in the country. It is one of the few agro-industrial enterprises in the world that specialises in a variety of crops – the four major ones being rubber, palm oil, tea and bananas. With the help of huge loans from several well-known financial institutions, including the World Bank, the International Development Association (IDA), the European Development Fund (EDF), the Commonwealth Development Corporation (Comdev) and the French *Caisse Centrale de Coopération Économique* (CCCE), it expanded its area under cultivation from 20,000 to 42,000 hectares following the achievement of independence and reunification in 1961. It is, after the government, the largest employer in the country, with a current labour force of about 14,500 (Konings 1993).

Above all, the CDC has made a major contribution to regional development in Anglophone Cameroon. It has created employment for both men and women, has constructed numerous roads, supplied water and electricity, built and staffed schools, awarded a substantial number of scholarships, provided medical care for a large proportion of the local population, and has stimulated the supply of goods and services to itself and its workers. It played a key role in the commercialisation and modernisation of peasant production in the 1950s and in the establishment of regional smallholders' oil-palm and rubber schemes since the early 1960s (Ardener 1958; Konings 1993). Of

late, it has handed over a substantial part of its oil-palm plantations to local contractors. As a result, the CDC has been called the economic lifeline of Anglophone Cameroon.

It is therefore not surprising that when the government announced the privatisation of this important agro-industrial enterprise on 15 July 1994, Anglophones were deeply incensed. One Anglophone columnist, Mr Jing Thomas, captured the essence of Anglophone sentiments:

The CDC is unlike any other corporation. It means native lands, especially those of the Bakweri. It means jobs for Cameroonians, especially the Anglophones. It is a symbol of Anglophone survival against all odds.... If the CDC falls.... the last act of internal colonisation would have been completed.<sup>1</sup>

The announced privatisation of the CDC was all the more shocking to the Anglophone population since the CDC (i) had been one of the very few public enterprises in Cameroon to perform relatively well until the economic crisis; (ii) had been able to survive this crisis mainly because the management and workers had agreed to adopt a series of drastic adjustment measures aimed at reducing costs and increasing productivity; and (iii) was on the way to economic recovery following the 50 per cent devaluation of the CFA franc in early 1994 that made CDC products more competitive on the world market (Konings 1995a). It prompted vehement protest actions in Anglophone Cameroon from various ethno-regional associations and pressure groups that had been either created or granted a large measure of autonomy in the wake of political liberalisation in December 1990.

The following ethno-regional organisations have been the most active. First, there are the various Anglophone associations that since 1993 have been operating under an umbrella organisation, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). They claim that the Anglophone minority has been exposed to Francophone domination, assimilation and exploitation since independence and reunification in 1961. While most of them initially demanded a return to a two-state (Anglophone-Francophone) federal state, the Biya government's persistent refusal to enter into any meaningful negotiations forced them to adopt a secessionist stand and pursue the creation of an independent Southern Cameroons state (cf. Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997, 2000; Eyoh 1998a). The government announcement of the CDC privatisation was seen by these Anglophone associations as a further step in the dismantling of the Anglophone colonial legacy by the Francophone-dominated state. As a consequence, they called upon Anglophones to forget about any internal differences and form a united front against attempts to sell the CDC to Francophone or French interests.

Besides the Anglophone associations, there were also the associations of the elite and chiefs in the South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon where most of the CDC estates are located. The most prominent South West associations were the South West Elite Association (SWELA) and the South West Chiefs' Conference (SWECC). There is some overlap between these organisations, with some important South West chiefs also being members of SWELA (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands 1998; Eyoh 1998b). Both associations seek to promote the South West Province's socio-economic and cultural revival. The South West was to be restored to its former glory after having been marginalised by the Francophone-dominated state and subjected to the 'imperialist' tendencies of the population of the other Anglophone province, the North West Province. Although both organisations supported most of the Anglophone grievances about Francophone domination, they equally claimed that the South West had been more disadvantaged than the North West in the post-colonial state in terms of distribution of strategic posts. Moreover, they stressed that the South West plantation

economy had been massively invaded by North West migrants who had come to form the majority of the workers and managers on the plantations and even of the urban population in South West towns. They accused the North West 'settlers' of dominating and exploiting their province by 'grabbing the best land' and controlling the regional administration, business and trade (Konings 2001). This situation has often given rise to rivalry and conflict between the South West and North West elite. The South West elite and chiefs particularly feared that the newly created Anglophone movements' pursuit of either a return to a two-state federation or outright secession would lead to renewed South West domination by the entrepreneurial North West majority. They were, therefore, inclined to champion a ten-state federal system based on the existing ten provinces in Cameroon, which would retain the present separation between the South West and the North West Provinces, thus safeguarding the former's autonomy.

Despite such internal rivalries and conflicts within the Anglophone community, the South West elite and chiefs favoured a (temporary) alliance with the leadership of the Anglophone movements when the privatisation of the CDC was announced. This alliance was justified on the grounds of the corporation's immense contribution to the welfare and development of the Anglophone community as a whole.

And finally there was the Bakweri Land Committee (BLC), the organisation of the Bakweri chiefs and elite in Fako Division of the South West Province, whose main goal has continued to be the retrieval of their ancestral lands that were expropriated under German colonial rule for the purpose of plantation production and later, in 1946, leased by the British Trusteeship Authority to the CDC. The BLC felt particularly aggrieved by the announced privatisation of the CDC. It felt betrayed at not having been previously consulted about the corporation's privatisation and it warned the government that the CDC lands were Bakweri lands and thus could not be sold to non-natives without Bakweri consent and compensation. The BLC is being supported in its current struggles by both the South West and Anglophone associations.

In addition to the Anglophone and South West associations, there were other civil-society organisations in the region that resisted the privatisation of the CDC. The most important was the Fako Agricultural Workers' Union (FAWU) that is responsible for the representation and defence of the CDC workers' interests (Konings 1993, 1995a). Its president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, is one of the most prominent trade-union leaders in Cameroon, having played a significant role in the achievement of a large measure of trade-union autonomy in 1992. He insisted that the CDC could not be privatised without the FAWU being consulted, arguing that the workers had made personal sacrifices during the economic crisis to assist the corporation's recovery by accepting drastic cuts in salaries and fringe benefits and contributing to a compulsory savings scheme. Moreover, the union, he said, would resist any mass lay-offs and/or deterioration in the workers' conditions of service as a result of privatisation (Konings 1995a).

And, finally, the Anglophone press has strongly condemned the announced privatisation. It has continued to defend the Anglophone cause and to inform the Anglophone population of the issues at stake.

### **Ethno-Regional Protest Actions against CDC Privatisation**

Following the government announcement of the CDC privatisation on 15 July 1994, all existing ethno-regional associations and opposition parties rallied to form a united front

to resist the government's decision. They alleged that privatisation of the CDC was 'an ill-disguised plot to hand over the corporation to the French and the Francophones' or 'a plan by Biya to compensate his "tribesmen" and allies with a slice of the parastatal cake'.<sup>2</sup> There were protest marches in Anglophone towns organised by SWELA and the Anglophone associations. Protesters carried banners with slogans such as 'France: Hands off Anglophones' and 'Hands off or we will burn the plantations'. The National Executive of the Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM), the most important Anglophone association, met on 30-31 July 1994 and condemned the CDC privatisation as a declaration of war against the people of Southern Cameroons and called upon Anglophones to observe 16 August as a day of protest and solidarity with the CDC.<sup>3</sup> SWELA thereupon declared 12 August as another day of solidarity with the CDC. Despite a ban on demonstrations on its solidarity day and a heavy police presence, a determined group of SWELA members led by Secretary-General Martin Nkemngu marched successfully to the governor's office where they presented a protest memorandum for the attention of the head of state.<sup>4</sup> At a press conference in Limbe on 20 August, the FAWU president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, declared that the union and the workers were totally against the dubious privatisation of the CDC. Since the workers had a joint financial stake in the corporation amounting to FCFA 5.5 billion, the privatisation could only be enforced on terms acceptable to the majority of the workers.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the most vehement opposition in Anglophone Cameroon came from landowners. As soon as the privatisation of the CDC was announced, the Bakweri chiefs and elite mobilised to revive the moribund BLC and to adopt a common position with regard to the privatisation, which had been planned without any consideration having been given to the Bakweri land problem. Soon thereafter, the BLC was renamed the Bakweri Land Claims Committee (BLCC).

On 23 July 1994, the Bakweri chiefs and elite met in Buea under the chairmanship of Paramount Chief S.M.L. Endeley of Buea and Paramount Chief F. Bille Manga Williams of Limbe to discuss the implications of the government's decision. After lengthy and passionate discussions, an *ad hoc* committee was elected by acclamation to assist the BLCC in preparing a detailed memorandum on the Bakweri position to be presented to the government and all other interested parties.<sup>6</sup>

Over 500 Bakweri chiefs, notables and elite gathered at the Buea Youth Cultural and Animation Center on 4 August 1994 and approved the memorandum drawn up by the *ad hoc* committee. In the memorandum, the Bakweri vehemently opposed the announced privatisation on the grounds that the CDC lands were Bakweri lands and thus could not be sold to non-natives without Bakweri consent and compensation.<sup>7</sup> The memorandum was later presented to the provincial governor for onward transmission to President Biya. At the end of this historic meeting, the eminent Bakweri scholar and secretary of the *ad hoc* committee, Professor Ndiva Kofele-Kale, was designated counsel for the Bakweri people with instructions to present their case before the United Nations and other international fora.

The Bakweri case was strongly supported by the Anglophone movements. A powerfully worded petition to the head of state, co-signed by the Anglophone movements and the Bakweri chiefs, reiterated that the Bakweri had never relinquished ownership of the CDC lands and that the corporation could not be sold without Bakweri consent. It pointed out that the Bakweri had never been paid royalties for the use of their lands since the creation of the CDC in 1946 and also stressed that the Bakweri were not inclined to renew the 60-year CDC lease, thus reclaiming the CDC lands after its expiry in 2007.

Concerned about the mounting anger in the Anglophone region in general and the Bakweri community in particular, the Biya government decided to send a delegation of high-ranking Anglophone allies to the South West Province to appease the population. The delegation was led by Chief Ephraim Inoni, the deputy secretary-general at the presidency, and the Chief of Bakingili, a village located on the territory of a Bakweri subgroup. The delegation met a number of Bakweri representatives in Buea to discuss the land problem. Though speaking on behalf of the government, Chief Inoni appealed to the Bakweri representatives not to forget that he was one of them. He acknowledged that there should have been prior contact between the government and the Bakweri before the announcement of the corporation's privatisation but he denied the widespread rumours in Anglophone Cameroon that the French and some high-ranking Francophones had masterminded the whole operation. While admitting that the financial situation of the corporation had improved after the 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc, he argued that privatisation would enable the corporation to obtain new capital for necessary investments in production and processing. The Bakweri Paramount Chief S.M.L. Endeley, who had always been a staunch supporter of the regime until the Bakweri land issue arose,<sup>8</sup> then took the floor. Amid thunderous applause he declared that he as the custodian of the ancestral lands and the Bakweri population as a whole were against the privatisation of the CDC. He requested that Chief Inoni report this to President Biya:

We are in a country where we like to cheat ourselves, where government hands decisions through dictatorship... We say no, no [to privatisation], go and tell Mr Biya that he cannot afford to go down in history as the man who sold the CDC.<sup>9</sup>

After the government delegation returned to Yaoundé, no further government action took place concerning CDC privatisation but this apparent victory for Anglophone resistance turned out to be short-lived. In 1997 rumours of an imminent privatisation of the CDC became more and more persistent. In conformity with the agreement concluded with the IMF and the World Bank within the framework of the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1997, the privatisation of the CDC was expected to be launched soon. That the government, under severe pressure from the Bretton Woods institutions, was preparing the ground for the privatisation of the CDC could be seen from the speeches and interviews of leading government and CDC officials at the opening ceremony of the corporation's golden-jubilee celebration in Bota-Victoria on 1 December 1997. For example, on that occasion the CDC deputy general manager, Mr Richard Grey, revealed that the highly reputable international consultancy firm Coopers and Lybrand had already been selected by the World Bank and the government to carry out a study into the privatisation of the CDC that would be completed by 30 June 1998.<sup>10</sup>

The CDC was finally put up for sale in January 1999. The leadership of the Anglophone movements immediately warned prospective CDC buyers to desist from investing in the purchase of the CDC. At a meeting with South Western members of parliament and government, the Bakweri chiefs and elite denounced the privatisation of the CDC saying that the latter's acceptance of the CDC sale 'was tantamount to a betrayal of their people'.<sup>11</sup> The BLCC officially wrote to President Biya on behalf of the Bakweri people on 3 March 1999 requesting that it be included in the privatisation negotiations and that compensation be paid for the use of Bakweri lands. When rumours spread that various multinational companies like Fruitiers/Dole, Chiquita and Del Monte were already negotiating with individual government officials about the purchase of the whole or parts of the CDC at throwaway prices, the Bakweri in the

diaspora once again addressed the head of state on 1 October 1999 in support of the BLCC position.<sup>12</sup>

Since no reply was forthcoming from the presidency, the BLCC, strongly supported by South West associations, like SWELA and SWECC, decided to raise national and international awareness by starting a high-profile public-relations campaign through the writing of open letters, petitions and newspaper articles and the use of the Internet. For this purpose, an interim bureau of the BLCC was set up in the United States in May 2000 to establish an effective, active and visible BLCC presence within the Bakweri and Cameroonian diaspora community and to open permanent lines of communication with all potential buyers of the CDC, donor agencies, NGOs and foreign governments directly or indirectly involved in the sale of the CDC. The BLCC-USA became very vocal, creating its own website on the Internet.<sup>13</sup> Its first action was to send a memorandum to the managing director of the IMF, Mr Horst Köhler, on 16 June 2000. In this memorandum, it warned him about the growing unrest among the Bakweri and threatened legal action should the privatisation of the CDC be pursued without BLCC involvement:

As the current impasse in Zimbabwe and Kenya demonstrates, land expropriated from African natives by European colonialists a century ago is the source of much contemporary unrest and instability. All Cameroonians of goodwill bear witness that the Bakweri people have over the years opted for a peaceful resolution of the CDC Bakweri land problem. However, should the privatisation of the CDC go ahead without the input of the Bakweri on whose land most of the corporation's agro-industrial activities are located, we preserve the right to seek legal redress against the government of the Republic of Cameroon, the IMF, the World Bank as well as all lessees who derive title to the land by whatever means, in any country of the world where such bodies are located.<sup>14</sup>

This was followed by massive pro-BLCC demonstrations in New York and Washington during the September 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit that was attended by a huge Cameroonian delegation led by President Paul Biya. As a result of these demonstrations and a flurry of other pro-BLCC activities on this occasion, the embarrassed Cameroonian delegation, along with leading donor agencies, were able to gauge the high levels of support for the BLCC within the entire Cameroonian diaspora community in the United States.

In a press release on 5 August 2000, the BLCC revealed that it was going to take its campaign for land restitution and compensation 'a notch higher' by seeking consultative status within the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It believed that the granting of consultative status would provide it with a global platform to proclaim its struggle for land rights, 'bringing it into contact with other NGOs which claim to represent the interests of indigenous groups from around the world as well as with sympathetic UN members who have championed the cause of dispossessed people on the floor of the General Assembly and at the numerous ECOSOC meetings over the years'.<sup>15</sup> Soon afterwards, on 21 August 2000, the BLCC counsel, Professor Ndiva Kofele-Kale, was invited by the United Nations to make a representation on the Bakweri lands issue to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

Following the government's renewed call for tenders for the sale of the CDC in September 2000, the BLCC cautioned prospective buyers in an open letter as follows:

It is our duty to advise you to think twice before you commit the resources of your shareholders in a venture that is still mired in controversy and whose promised financial and economic rewards may prove to be illusory in the long run.<sup>16</sup>

It became increasingly evident that the BLCC was finding it hard to defend Bakweri interests at the national level after ‘their own son’, Peter Mafany Musonge, the then general manager of the CDC, was appointed prime minister in 1996. Without doubt, one of the main reasons for his appointment to this position was that President Biya regarded him, being an ex-CDC general manager and a Bakweri, as the most suitable candidate to handle the delicate issue of CDC privatisation.

The appointment of Musonge initially raised high expectations among the Bakweri. They were convinced that their son would pay particular attention to the land question and take Bakweri interests into consideration during any eventual sale of the CDC. Their expectations appeared to have a solid foundation because, in his former capacity as CDC general manager, Musonge had publicly declared during a 1994 radio interview that any privatisation of the CDC should be ‘not only economically effective but also socially equitable’. For that reason, indigenous landowners, workers and investors would be directly involved in this endeavour.<sup>17</sup> Once appointed prime minister however, he came under immense pressure from the IMF and his master, Paul Biya, to champion the economic advantages of CDC privatisation and to forget about the payment of compensation to Bakweri landowners. This put the Bakweri in an awkward position. On the one hand, they refused to withdraw their claims to the CDC lands. On the other hand, however, they fully realised that they were obliged to operate carefully in this matter so as not to undermine Musonge’s post as prime minister, which they saw as a key to prebendal politics and Bakweri socio-economic development.

Unable to convince his ethnic group to give up its claim to compensation, Musonge is reported to have resorted to intimidation, using the Buea sub-prefect and the Fako prefect to that end. In March 2000, the Buea sub-prefect, Mr Aboubakar Njikam, banned a BLCC general assembly meeting for which he had earlier given his approval. The prime minister appears quickly to have ordered a halt to the meeting when he learnt that compensation was high on the agenda but he failed to intimidate the committee, which eventually met on 15 April 2000. In June 2000, the Fako prefect, Jean-Robert Mengue Meka, accused it of being an illegal organisation and the committee was ordered to cease its activities. Two of the newly elected BLCC executives, Chief Peter Moky Efangé (president) and Mola Njoh Litumbe (secretary-general), responded by telling Mengue Meka that he was acting illegally himself by claiming that the BLCC, which was founded as long ago as 1946, was an unlawful association. The prefect was reminded that the BLCC was a duly incorporated organisation that had been registered in accordance with the laws of the country and had been received by the South West governor in 1994 and could thus not now have its legality questioned.<sup>18</sup>

With the high profile publicity given to the BLCC both at home and abroad, the prime minister could no longer ignore the committee and its demands. He invited it to a working session in his Yaoundé office and on 4 October 2000, the BLCC leadership met with Musonge, Chief Ephraim Inoni, the Bakweri deputy general secretary at the presidency and a number of other government officials. During this meeting Musonge conceded that the issues of land ownership and the payment of ground rents were legitimate demands but urged that these demands be pursued separately from the issue of privatisation. He argued that a hostile environment was being created by the BLCC protest campaign, which was scaring off potential investors.<sup>19</sup>

The BLCC delegation agreed with the prime minister that privatisation would be successful only in a peaceful atmosphere but it pointed out that the Bakweri protest actions, such as the UN Millennium Summit demonstrations, stemmed from a lack of government response to their pleas and representations. It stressed that Bakweri protest

actions would inevitably continue until ‘justice, equity, and legitimate rights of the Bakweri were met’. The delegation then reiterated the main BLCC demands, namely:

- that the government recognise that the lands occupied by the CDC were private property as defined by Part II of the 1974 Land Law and that the Bakweri were the legitimate owners of these lands;
- that the Bakweri be fully involved in the CDC privatisation negotiations to ensure that their interests were effectively protected;
- that ground rents be paid to a Bakweri land trust fund; and
- that the Bakweri, acting jointly or individually be allocated a specific percentage of shares in each of the privatised sectors of the corporation.<sup>20</sup>

While the BLCC was trying to embark on a dialogue with local and national authorities, it continued to caution potential CDC buyers and the Bretton Woods institutions against any privatisation of the corporation without the involvement of the landowners. On 19 October 2001, a group of the Anglophone elite in the diaspora, including a large number of Bakweri, addressed a letter to the managing director of the IMF, in which they cautioned him against the perils of going ahead with the privatisation of the CDC without the involvement of the landowners:

We hope that the IMF will not unwittingly become a signatory to what is certain to become an important public policy fiasco. As an organisation that supports and encourages transparency and accountability in all its dealings, we hope that the IMF will expect no less from Cameroon. The IMF must insist that proper consultation of the people, especially the relevant stakeholder groups, be undertaken before the future of this important agro-industrial complex is determined... The unilateral privatisation of the CDC without proper consultation ... cannot provide a viable and sustainable solution to the country’s economic problems.<sup>21</sup>

To the consternation of the Anglophones in general and the Bakweri in particular, it was announced in October 2002 that the three CDC tea estates had been sold to a South African consortium, Brobon Finex PTY Limited. One of these estates, the Tole Tea Estate, was located in the Bakweri area (Konings 1995b). Brobon Finex would run the tea sector under the name Cameroon Tea Estates (CTE). The BLCC immediately expressed its ‘total bewilderment’ at the sale of the CDC tea estates without any consultation or compensation of the landowners in spite of previous deliberations between the committee and the government.<sup>22</sup> The secessionist umbrella organisation of the Anglophone movements, the SCNC, claimed that the Francophone-dominated state had ‘no *locus standi* whatsoever to privatise, sell or transfer the CDC Tole Tea Estate and the CDC Ndu Tea Estate located indisputably and exclusively within the territorial boundaries of the Southern Cameroons to the South African consortium Brobon Finex PTY or to any other person’.<sup>23</sup>

The privatisation of the CDC tea estates became a national scandal when evidence emerged that it was going to benefit only a handful of politically well-connected elites at the expense of the public treasury and the native landowners. From his own revelations, it became clear that this privatisation had been masterminded by John Niba Ngu, a former CDC general manager and minister of agriculture, who is generally known as a close friend of President Biya. He used both his technical knowledge and his many connections within the highest levels of the regime to design the privatisation of the CDC tea estates. While experts had conservatively estimated the value of the estates at about FCFA 3.2 billion, Ngu managed to bring down the price to FCFA 1.5 billion. Less than three months later, the CTE sold tea worth FCFA 4.6 billion. In return for his excellent services, the CTE Board allocated Ngu 5 per cent of the company’s share

capital and appointed him general manager with a monthly salary and fringe benefits amounting to FCFA 4 million.<sup>24</sup>

There were also growing doubts about the takeover of the CDC tea estates by the South African consortium Brobon Finex. It became instead more and more evident that the real owner of the CTE was Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo, a rich Hausa-Fulani from the North West Province, who was apparently using Brobon Finex as a front. Danpullo is a well-known cattle rancher and businessman in Cameroon with an international network stretching as far as South Africa. He is also a member of the Central Committee of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Interestingly, Danpullo had been previously involved in another privatisation scandal in Cameroon, namely the attempt to sell the *Société de Développement du Coton* (SODECOTON), a huge parastatal in Northern Cameroon which was on the same privatisation list as the CDC in 1994. Danpullo was among the small group of politically well-connected elite, most of them originating from Northern Cameroon, who managed to buy the company at a give-away price. The deal was eventually cancelled by the government following popular outcry and intervention by the external donors, in particular France and the World Bank (Takougang & Krieger 1998: 169-80). Although Danpullo was not a signatory to the convention between the Cameroonian government and Brobon Finex, he paid the price for the takeover of the CDC tea estates to the public treasury and has been engaged in other financial transactions on behalf of the CTE. Investigations by the BLCC in South Africa found that Brobon Finex exists in name only and has no office premises. Its chairman, Derrick Garvie, is indeed known in South African business circles but not in connection with Brobon Finex. This raised suspicions that Brobon Finex was merely a straw company.<sup>25</sup>

In January 2003, the BLCC threatened to sue Brobon Finex PTY in South Africa for trespassing on Bakweri property without the prior knowledge of the owners. In addition, it has called upon the government to revoke the controversial privatisation of the CDC tea estates and 'to open meaningful discussions with the BLCC with a view to achieving an equitable resolution of the Bakweri land problem'.<sup>26</sup> Soon thereafter, Biya sent Chief Ephraim Inoni, the Bakweri assistant secretary-general at the presidency, on another delicate mission to appease the Bakweri chiefs. Following the failure of this mission and the growing evidence of various financial malpractices in the privatisation of the CDC tea estates, he instructed Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge and the security forces to investigate the matter.<sup>27</sup> It would appear that he himself has serious questions to answer for personally authorising the transfer of CDC tea estates to his friends.

## Conclusion

Privatisation has become a cornerstone of the good governance-structural adjustment linkage formulated by western donors and creditors and imposed upon African states. It is, in essence, an attempt to free state enterprises from 'politics', in particular from the government's neo-patrimonial logic that is seen as the basic cause of their malfunctioning, to introduce transparency, accountability and the rule of law in policy-making and implementation needed for the efficient operation of market forces, and to redirect the state away from being an entrepreneur to being a promoter of private enterprise.

This study seems to largely confirm widespread evidence that both African governments and civil-society organisations are inclined to oppose externally imposed privatisation schemes. Cameroonian government officials have constantly attempted to

postpone and manipulate the implementation of such schemes, which challenge the patronage system that forms a stabilising and uniting factor in the weak nation-state, undermine their limited popular legitimacy, and provoke ethno-regional protest. Although their heavy dependence on western donors for continued financial assistance eventually forced them to comply, they then attempted to sell state corporations to members of the 'hegemonic alliance' at give-away prices. The various ethno-regional associations that have emerged in Anglophone Cameroon during political liberalisation have persistently contested any attempts to privatise the CDC. Having been excluded from the decision-making process, they have strongly protested against their loss of control over ancestral lands and regional parastatals, which they considered as a renewed onslaught by the Francophone-dominated post-colonial state on their regional economic heritage.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Fako International*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January), 1995, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *New African*, no. 326 (January), 1995, p. 25; and *Africa International*, nos 279/280 (January-February), 1995, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> CAM, 'Communiqué of the Enlarged Ex-Bureau Meeting, 30-31 July 1994 (mimeo); and CAM, 'CAM Resolution on the Privatisation of the CDC', 30-31 July 1994 (mimeo).

<sup>4</sup> *The Herald*, 18-21 August 1994, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Cameroon Post*, 6-19 September 1994, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Fako International*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 1995), pp. 14-16.

<sup>7</sup> Memorandum of the Bakweri People on the Presidential Decree to Privatisise or Sell the Cameroon Development Corporation, Buea, 27 July 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Chief S.M.L. Endeley is a brother of Dr E.M.L. Endeley and Mr D.M.L. Endeley who were leading figures in the BLC. He is a retired Chief Justice who acted, among others, as chairman of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), in Fako Division and chairman of the CDC before being appointed Paramount Chief of Buea in 1992. For his career, see Gwellem, J.F. (1985) *Cameroon Year Book 1985/86*, Limbe: Gwellem Publications: 113-14.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in *Fako International*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 1995), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *The Post*, 5 December 1997, pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Isaha'a Boh Cameroon, Bulletin no. 405.

<sup>12</sup> See Letter from the Bakweri around the World to President Paul Biya of Cameroon, dated 1 October 1999.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.bakwerilands.org>. Most of the documents quoted in this study can be found on this website.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Dr Lyombe Eko, Executive Director of BLCC-USA, to Mr Horst Köhler, Managing Director of the IMF, dated 16 June 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Press Release no. blc/us/05/08/00, The BLCC to seek consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

<sup>16</sup> BLCC, Open Letter to All Prospective Buyers of CDC Plantations, Buea, 12 October 2000.

<sup>17</sup> See *Cameroon Post*, 26 July-2 August 1994, pp. 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> BLCC, The BLCC refuses to stand down in the face of threats from Fako administrative authorities, Buea, 15 June 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Through such manoeuvres, Musonge succeeded, albeit temporarily, in dividing the BLCC into two camps: on the one hand, a majority faction led by its president, Chief Efange, which stood its ground, and, on the other, a minority faction led by the Bakweri Paramount Chief, Sam Endeley, which was more sensitive to Musonge's arguments. The latter accused the new BLCC executive of being too 'radical' and opposed its ongoing Internet campaign on the CDC's privatisation compensation.

<sup>20</sup> See Report of the Meeting of Prime Minister Mafany Musonge with BLCC Delegation, Yaoundé, 4 October 2000.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.bakwerilands.org/land> problem.htm, 'The Bakweri Land Problem: A Historical Review'.

<sup>22</sup> See *The Herald*, 21 October 2002.

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<sup>23</sup> BSCNation, 1 November 2002, 'Privatisation of the CDC or part thereof by *La République du Cameroun* is illegal and unacceptable'.

<sup>24</sup> *The Herald*, 27 February 2003.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 January 2003; and 27 February 2003.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 January 2003.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 February 2003.

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