

Cameroon Digital Rights Landscape Report

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This report is part of 'Digital Rights in Closing Civic Space: Lessons from Ten African Countries'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

1. Introduction

Internet users in Cameroon face many challenges when it comes to accessing civic space, and particularly digital civic space – not least the notorious months-long internet shutdowns. Economic, social, cultural, and political factors all play a part in the landscape of the digital rights of this badly divided country. This report aims to briefly sketch the relevant political, civic, and technological landscape. It examines the various barriers to accessing digital civic space faced by journalists, minorities, and ordinary citizens, and identifies gaps in knowledge and capacity that must be addressed in order to allow the citizens of Cameroon to monitor their civic space and exercise their digital rights. The report suggests that some of the essential steps are securing internet access and educating citizens in identifying fake news, and concludes that internal security and international scrutiny are the necessary foundation for protecting civic space.

2. The political landscape

2.1 Background

Cameroon is a lower-middle-income country in West Africa with a population of around 25 million (World Bank 2019), comprising more than 200 ethnic groups (Tchouteu 2017). Around half of the population live in an urban setting (Benneh and DeLancey 2020). Economic development is held back by economic and political corruption: Cameroon scores only 25 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index, where 100 indicates the absence of corruption (Transparency International 2019). The country suffers from high unemployment as well as ongoing ethnic and regional tensions, which have escalated to the point of being almost a civil war – notably in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country. Since 2008, it has consistently been rated in the ‘alert’ category for state fragility (Fund for Peace 2020).

Cameroon is divided into majority francophone (French-speaking) and minority anglophone (English-speaking) regions. Many anglophone Cameroonians feel sidelined by the francophone regime, which has led to protests and even separatist movements in recent years.

Cameroon is officially a democracy with universal suffrage, but the effectiveness of the democracy is undermined by an autocratic regime. Paul Biya has been president of Cameroon since the 1980s, and is entitled to appoint ministers, vice-ministers, and regional functionaries. He is also the head of the armed forces (Nations Encyclopedia 2020a). Although there has been a multi-party system since the 1990s, and despite major anti-Biya protests in 2008, Biya’s party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM), has retained power at every election.

Contested elections have been a recurring theme of Paul Biya’s premiership. The CPDM has convincingly won every election since the introduction of democratic elections, but there have frequently been accusations of irregularities, fraud, and voter intimidation. In 2006, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) was created as an independent body to monitor elections, although it did not begin work until 2010. The fact that 11 of its 12 members were members of the CPDM and appointed by the president made its true independence questionable (*Cameroon Today* n.d.).

Despite the oversight of ELECAM, there were accusations in the 2011 presidential election that the opposition had colluded with the government. At that point, all of the leaders of the opposition were still former members of the Cameroon National Union, the party (headed by Biya) that ruled

Cameroon when it was a single-party state, until 1985 (Tchouteu 2017). Likewise, in the first senatorial elections in 2013, there were reports that the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), had cooperated with Biya for personal reward to ensure that the CPDM established control of the senate (*ibid.*).

Biometric voter registration was introduced in 2013 but allegations of serious electoral irregularities have not gone away (Reuters 2018). The president has abused his political power to remove restrictions to presidential terms and to ensure that the new senate was full of his supporters, avoiding genuine political scrutiny (Tchouteu 2017).

2.2 Recent political developments

Since 2016, there have been protests and political unrest in the anglophone regions, which led to these regions being badly underrepresented in the 2018 elections. Separatist groups have been involved in conflict with government forces, and both sides have been accused of atrocities against civilians (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Since the unrest began in 2016, separatists have imposed 'ghost town days' in the anglophone regions every Monday, when all social and economic activity is suppressed. 'Ghost town' protests were originally used in the 1990s as part of a strike by transportation workers, but the idea has been revived and imposed by threat of force. Separatist factions in the western (anglophone) regions of Cameroon seek to create the state of 'Ambazonia'. A symbolic Independence Day was celebrated in the anglophone regions in October 2018, which provoked a government backlash. However, separatist groups remain divided, reducing their effectiveness (Foute 2019b). Other activists in anglophone regions simply want more representation for English speakers within Cameroon. There was considerable unrest in 2016 when proposals were released for French to replace English in the education and judicial systems within the anglophone regions (Atabong 2016).

Paul Tasong, Economic Minister Delegate in charge of Planning, was appointed as National Coordinator of the Presidential Plan for the Reconstruction and Development of the Northwest and Southwest regions in April 2020. This ten-year plan aims to promote social cohesion, revitalise social infrastructure, and revive the economy of the region, but time will tell whether these measures will end the conflict in the area (Cameroon Tribune 2020).

3. The civic space landscape

The term 'civic space' refers to an open and democratic society. An open civic space allows citizens and civil society organisations to organise, participate, and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens, and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully, and freely express views and opinions (see CIVICUS 2020). These rights are not available in Cameroon, with the country being classed as 'not free' every year since 1977 (Freedom House 2019, 2020; see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Freedom House ranking for ADRN countries, 2000–19¹

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Zimbabwe	Partially free	Partially free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Zambia	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Uganda	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partially free	Not free
Sudan	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
South Africa	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	N/A	Free	N/A	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free
Nigeria	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Kenya	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Ethiopia	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
Egypt	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
Cameroon	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free



Note: ADRN – African Digital Rights Network.

Source: Adapted from Freedom House (2019)

Flashpoints over civic space have generally occurred around the time of elections, which are widely regarded as fraudulent and corrupt. Biometric voter registration was mandated in 2012 and rolled out from 2013, using German technology. The permanent biometric register of voters is now

¹ Data not available for 2010 and 2012.

updated each year (Azonga 2014). Despite this attempt to regularise voting practices, suspicions and allegations of fraud and disenfranchisement still accompany elections in Cameroon.

Cameroon is a member of the United Nations (UN) and the African Union, and as such has ratified many UN human rights conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (National Commissions for UNESCO of France and Germany 2010). However, in practice, Cameroon has been accused of many human rights abuses during the last 20 years, particularly since the beginning of the anglophone crisis in 2016. Accusations include unlawful or arbitrary killings, forced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour 2019). Civic space is closed down by restrictions on political participation, peaceful assembly, and freedom of association, while the media is controlled by violence, threats, and unjustified arrests (*ibid.*).

3.1 The civic space and the media

Cameroon is currently ranked 134 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders 2020). Much of its media is controlled by the state. While there are dozens of private newspapers, none of them is as regularly produced or as widely read as the government newspaper, the *Cameroon Tribune*. Cameroon's radio and TV network is controlled by the Office de Radiodiffusion–Télévision Camerounaise (CRTV), which is under the authority of the Ministry of Information and Culture (Nations Encyclopedia 2020b). The government is willing to use its power to shut down criticism or scrutiny by the private media. In 2008, Equinox TV was forcibly suspended. The reason given by the government was that it had failed to pay a broadcast licence fee, but it was generally believed that it was actually because of Equinox's coverage of the 2008 protests against the removal of limits on presidential terms.

Abuses against the media and journalists followed the contested 2018 election (CPJ 2020). In November 2018, Equinox presenter and prominent anglophone journalist, Mimi Mefo Takambou, was detained and charged with disseminating fake news, endangering state security, and terrorism (BBC Monitoring 2018). Then in 2019, pidgin journalist Samuel Wazizi died in military custody, allegedly from torture (CPJ 2020). In August 2019, the USA excluded Cameroon from a regional trade pact because of its human rights abuses (Ekonde and Adebayo 2019).

The latest example of intimidation of the media is the arrest in July 2020 of Ojong Joseph, a human rights reporter. On 14 February 2020, there was a massacre in Ngarbuh, a village in the anglophone Northwest region, allegedly by government troops. The government initially denied the massacre and denigrated international human rights observers, saying civilian deaths were an unfortunate accident during a clash with separatist terrorists. However, they later carried out an inquiry and arrested three soldiers for the outrage (Finnan 2020). This provides a glimmer of hope about Cameroon's future attitude both to civil rights and to disinformation.

3.2 The civic space and minorities

The key minority in Cameroon is the English-speaking population, who make up about 20 per cent of the country. The recent anglophone crisis was precipitated by the neglect of English as a medium, and the prioritising of French systems, in the anglophone education and judicial systems (Atabong 2016). Since the beginning of the crisis in 2016, it is estimated that 3,000 people have been killed and half a million have had to flee their homes (Human Rights Watch 2020b).

Both the government and anglophone separatists have been accused of violence, including sexual violence. This means that women and girls are especially vulnerable to being targeted in the conflict. In addition, the Cameroon government is poor at tackling crimes of violence against women (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour 2019). Girls are entitled to access education on the same basis as boys, but female literacy continues to lag behind that of males (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2020). Women are also less likely to have access to the internet (Toussi 2019).

Same-sex sexual activity is against the law in Cameroon, and there is widespread discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The lack of legal protection from discrimination makes it harder for members of this community to access education, health care, and employment (Acodevo *et al.* 2017). The 2010 law on cybercrime and cyberterrorism explicitly criminalises using electronic communications to sexually proposition a member of the same sex, a prohibition that does not extend to opposite-sex propositions. Blackmail and extortion against people who have (or are perceived to have) a homosexual orientation are common, and there is very little redress. Organisations that support LGBT rights find it difficult to register in Cameroon, and lawyers who defend people accused of LGBT crimes can be subject to intimidation (*ibid.*).

All of these restrictions and difficulties mean that the severely limited civic space in Cameroon is even more limited for people other than heterosexual, francophone males.

3.3 The civic space timeline

The first major disturbance of the last 20 years in Cameroon began in February 2008. President Paul Biya proposed a constitutional amendment that would remove limits upon presidential terms, which would enable him to continue as president even though he had already held office for 25 years. The major opposition party organised a demonstration but the presence of *gendarmes* (military security forces) forced this to be called off. *Gendarmes* and police used tear gas and water cannons, but this only inflamed the situation, leading to the deaths of two young men. A TV channel that focused on the protests was shut down on a pretext (Global Security n.d.).

Protests continued in February 2008 over the death of the two youths, the extension of presidential terms, and worsening economic conditions, including high food prices. Rather than engaging with criticism, the government of Cameroon responded with high levels of violence, leaving at least 16 people dead (Global Security n.d.).

In 2010 and 2014, the government of Cameroon responded to new threats with new laws. The 2010 law on cybercrime and cyberterrorism was intended to stop the spread of harmful false information and the promotion of terrorism, but the terms of the law mean that it partly criminalises free speech online, as there are possible fines and jail terms for those who disseminate information that they cannot verify. Cameroon is troubled by genuine terrorists connected to Boko Haram and ISIS in Africa, but the law on terrorism that was passed in 2014 was later abused to hold journalists in detention. One problem with these laws is that the government of Cameroon may define 'terrorism' very differently from those posting content online – content that they believe to be legitimate criticism. This was illustrated in 2016 when there was a serious train derailment. Reports circulated on social media while the government was still officially denying knowledge of the accident, and later individual statements and videos of the accident on social media contradicted official government accounts about the cause and the number of casualties. The government of Cameroon and the state-run media reacted with strong criticism of social media use in general, with Cavaye Djibril, Speaker of the National Assembly, calling it a 'social malaise' and even 'a new form of terrorism' (Tande 2016).

The year 2017 was that of the long internet shutdowns, which were used as a tactic to shut down civic space, especially for anglophones. The first shutdown began in 2017 and lasted for 93 days. It seems to have been in response to anglophone protests about the sidelining of English in education and the judiciary. English and French officially have equal status in Cameroon, but in practice, French has priority and English is often neglected by the francophone regime (Atabong 2016). The first shutdown originally affected the whole of Cameroon but was later restricted to the anglophone regions. After international pressure from the UN, internet access was restored, but a further, longer shutdown followed in October 2017. Money transfers, online businesses, certain kinds of health care (e.g. coordinating malaria treatment), and education all relied on internet access. Tech entrepreneurs, without access to the internet, were forced to move to other parts of Cameroon or to leave the country (Ritzen 2018).

In 2018, Paul Biya won a seventh term as president in an election that was marred by low turnout, especially in anglophone regions, where intimidation of anglophone voters kept voter turnout in single figures (Reuters 2018). In an effort at public relations, CRTV featured an interview with a person claiming to be a Transparency International observer who said the elections were 'extremely good' (O'Donnell and Gramer 2018). This person was later exposed as a fraud with no links whatsoever to Transparency International (Transparency International 2018).

Table 3.1 Civic space timeline table – key events

Year	Shift	Implication
2006	ELECAM created to monitor elections, starts to function in 2010.	Shows government intention that elections be seen as free and fair, despite no actual improvement.
2008	Riots over food prices harshly suppressed.	Increasing government authoritarianism.
2010	New law on cybersecurity and cybercriminality.	Limits freedom of speech online.
2011	Paul Biya stands for re-election. Mobile access to Twitter stopped for ten days because of protests.	The first major incident of internet censorship in Cameroon, demonstrates growing importance of online activism.
2012–13	Introduction of biometric voter registration.	Aimed at reducing electoral irregularities.
2014	Journalists arrested for defamation.	Chilling effect on freedom of the press.
2015	New law requires registration for all SIM card owners to target criminal and terrorist activity.	Increases government control over telecoms companies and citizens' access to communications.
2016	Journalists arrested for failing to disclose information and sources.	Restriction on press freedom.
2017	Anglophone journalists, opposition politicians, and civil society figures imprisoned.	Anglophone voices silenced, power reserved for francophone administration.
2017	Writer Patrice Nganang arrested after criticising government on Facebook.	Chilling effect on freedom of speech and online dialogue.
2018	Paul Biya re-elected in contested election. Abuses against media and journalists follow.	Criticism of the government and electoral process becomes more dangerous.
2019	Journalist Samuel Wazizi dies in military custody.	Chilling effect on freedom of the press.
2019	New law passed criminalising hate speech and tribalism.	Gives the government new powers over freedom of speech, can be used in partisan manner.
2020	Human rights reporter Ojong Joseph is arrested.	Sends a message about lack of respect for human rights.

Source: Author's own.

4. The technology landscape

Although privately owned television stations have been allowed in Cameroon since 2001, the government still maintains a high degree of control over the media.

Fixed-line telephones are comparatively rare, but there is high uptake of mobile telephone services. In 2000, there were 95,000 landline telephones in use whereas in 2002 there were already 300,000 mobile phones in use (Nations Encyclopedia 2020b). The use of mobile phones has increased steadily over the last 20 years, especially as costs for fixed lines continue to be prohibitive. Recent data show that mobile phone penetration has reached 90 per cent of the population, or 23.6 million people.²

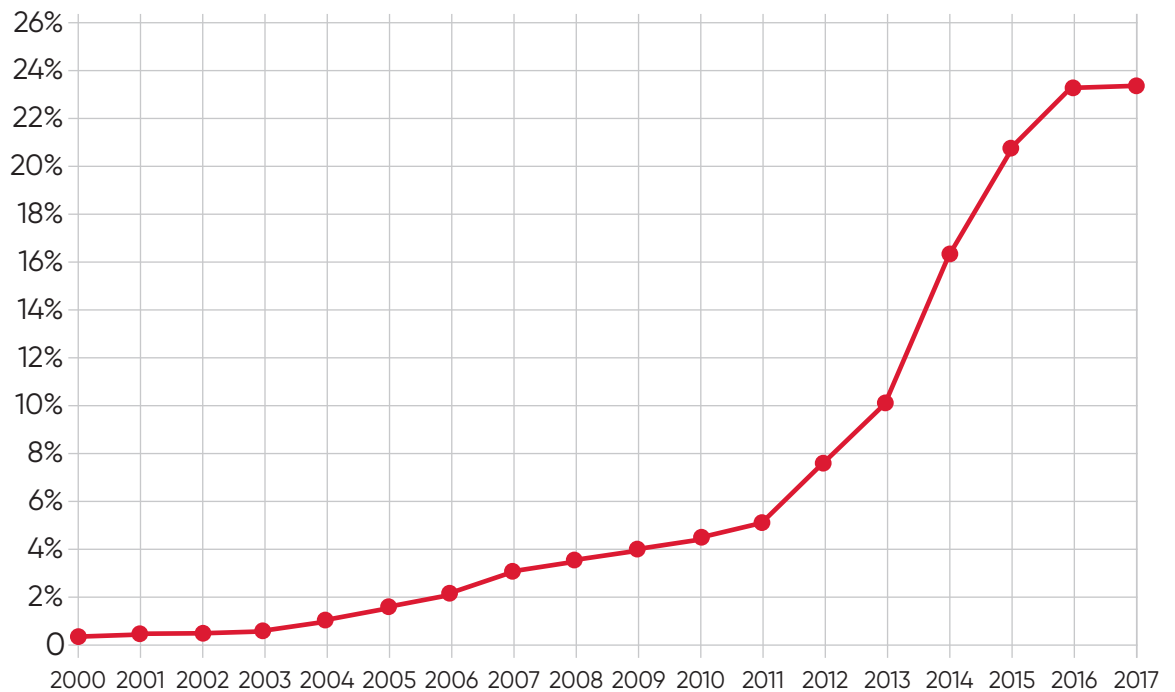
Fixed telephone lines are provided by the Cameroon Telecommunications Corp (CAMTEL), which is owned by the state. In 2020, there are four private mobile telecoms providers, but telecoms are still controlled by CAMTEL, the state-owned mobile provider that holds the monopoly of optical fibre management (African Telecoms News n.d.). CAMTEL can suspend the access of other internet providers, something that happened in October 2017, when Orange Cameroon's use of the networks was unlawfully suspended as the result of a payment dispute that Orange strongly denied, cutting off service for its users (Medou Badang 2017).

The introduction of 3G and 4G mobile internet took place in 2015–16. This allowed wider use of the internet, as people had previously had to rely on internet cafes. Unfortunately, lack of real competition between mobile providers has kept mobile internet expensive and therefore either inaccessible or severely limited for most people in the country (Owono and Blanc 2014). Neither mobile telephones nor fixed-line telephones are an affordable internet solution for most Cameroonians.

Internet penetration has grown hugely in Cameroon over the last 20 years, from 0.25 per cent in 2000 up to 23.1 per cent in 2020 (see Figure 4.1). However, this total remains low compared to the African average of 39.3 per cent and the world average of 58.8 per cent (Statista 2020). Internet services are notoriously slow in Cameroon, with bandwidths of 340 gigabytes in 2014, compared to 12 terabytes in nearby Ghana (Owono and Blanc 2014).

² See **Mobile Connections in Cameroon**.

Figure 4.1 Percentage of the population with internet access in Cameroon



Source: Based on data from ITU (2020)

In 2010, the government took its first major step in trying to control cyberspace. It passed a new law relating to cybersecurity and cybercriminality. While many countries have laws aimed at preventing online crime and terrorism, what was significant about this law was that users of social media could be punished with fines and imprisonment if they shared information that could not be verified:

Whoever uses electronic communications or an information system to design, to publish or propagate a piece of information without being able to attest its veracity or prove that the said piece of information was true shall be punished with imprisonment for from 06 (six) months to 02 (two) years or a fine of from 5,000,000 (five million) to 10,000,000 (ten million) CFA francs or both of such fine and imprisonment.³

This naturally places ordinary citizens at a disadvantage, as they may be forced either to accept government accounts of events or to face legal punishments for disseminating information from other sources. This law also discriminates against LGBT people by criminalising 'sexual propositions to another person of the same sex' (Acodevo *et al.* 2017: 6).

Although the government set up a bilingual web portal as early as 2001, its use remains limited, partly due to citizens lacking access to the internet,

³ Section 78(1), Law n° 2010/012 of 21 December 2010 Relating to Cybersecurity and Cybercriminality in Cameroon.

and partly due to a failure of government to engage with the potential of the new medium. The train derailment incident in 2016 (see section 3.3) clearly demonstrated the government's distrust and suspicion of social media and instant internet communication.

This hostile attitude is also shown in the internet shutdowns that have been a notorious government tactic in Cameroon within the last five years. Despite difficulties of access due to high expense, the internet has been used in recent years for education, health care (e.g. access to malaria treatment), and for entrepreneurial, web-based businesses. Government shutdowns in 2017 into 2018 had a catastrophic effect on all web-based commerce and amenities, driving some entrepreneurs out of the country (Ritzen 2018). These shutdowns have often been contained to just the anglophone regions, highlighting their political nature. The justification given by the government for shutdowns (when one is offered) is to prevent the dissemination of misleading and harmful information. The government has also 'throttled' internet access at times by deliberately reducing bandwidth. Sometimes this throttling is targeted, as with the slowdown of social media before the announcement of the 2018 election results (Netblocks 2018).

There is also evidence that the Cameroon state engages in surveillance of emails and social media, although this is not highly developed, given Cameroon's low level of internet usage (APC and Hivos 2014).

Despite a low level of Twitter use, hashtag campaigns have been used to express discontent about the political and economic situation in Cameroon, and to garner international attention (Nganji and Cockburn 2020). This method was used successfully in 2017 with the #BringBackOurInternet hashtag. The prominent whistle-blower Edward Snowden **tweeted his support**. International attention may have contributed to the decision of the Cameroon government to restore internet access. However, it did not stop them from imposing a second, even longer shutdown after the protests in the anglophone regions following a symbolic anglophone 'Independence Day' on 1 October 2017.

The Cameroonian diaspora helped with the #BringBackOurInternet campaign. Emigrants often use web-based technology to take part in the civic space of Cameroon, using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Okwuosa 2017). Their internet access tends to be much better, especially when they are living in Western countries such as Germany or the USA, but government restrictions on internet access within Cameroon have the power to limit the effectiveness of diaspora interventions, if the resident population cannot receive communications.

The government imposed higher transfer charges on wire transfer agencies such as MoneyGram and Western Union in January 2019. Later in 2019, there were allegations that funds transfers to anglophone regions of the country were being deliberately blocked (Mimi Mefo Info 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, they also requested telecoms companies to shut down

electronic money transfers to a relief fund for needy families because it was coordinated by the opposition party Cameroon Resistance Movement (CRM) (Paradigm Initiative 2020).

Table 4.1 Technology timeline table

Year	Shift	Implication
2001	E-government web portal set up: Services du Premier Ministre	Groundwork for e-governance and open government data
2010	Universal Telecom Service Law	Opens phone and internet access to badly-served regions, increasing civic space
2010	Cybercrime and Cybersecurity Law	Fines and imprisonment for anyone unable to prove the veracity of online posts
2011	Mobile access to Twitter blocked for ten days because of protests	Demonstrates that online protest was impacting government
2013	Compulsory biometric ID	To address election irregularities
2014	Third mobile phone provider introduced	Potential for service improvement through competition (not realised yet)
2015	Mandatory SIM registration	Reduces privacy. Aids surveillance
2015–16	Introduction of 3G and 4G	Open access to online info and communications
2016	Digital Cameroon strategic plan launched	Positive intention to increase digital access, but this did not last
2016	#AnglophoneCrisis campaign goes viral internationally	Opens international space to issues and puts pressure on government
2017	Two major internet shutdowns: 1st: 93 days, whole country 2nd: 250 days, anglophone region only	Dramatic closing of civic space and increase in government control
2017	Use of VPNs to evade shutdowns	Keeps space open for those able to afford access to VPN software
2017	#bringbackourinternet campaign gains international traction	External pressure forces reopening of online civic space
2018	Throttling of bandwidth to slow social media before announcement of election results	Closes space for citizen voices in commentary on events
2019	Tax imposed on international app downloads	Expense restricts access and creates class divide in digital access
2019	Higher transfer charges imposed on wire transfer agencies	Restricts financial options of Cameroonians
2020	Government requests shutdown of opposition fundraising for pandemic relief #BringBackOurRice hashtag started	Citizens attempt to hold government accountable

Source: Author's own.

5. The digital rights landscape

Digital proficiency in Cameroon is still at a low level. Citizens face particular challenges to using the internet in general, and to effectively using it as a medium of civic space. The government launched a *Strategic Plan for a Digital Cameroon by 2020* in 2016 which aimed to improve infrastructure and increase cybersecurity and digital literacy, but these laudable aims were undermined by shutting off the internet the following year (Digital Cameroon 2016).

The high cost of internet on both mobiles and landlines leaves many Cameroonians unable to access the internet. Cameroon has lower internet penetration than average for Africa, at 23.1 per cent. Only 10.2 per cent of citizens have a Facebook account (Statista 2020). This problem is compounded by the limitations of the electricity network, which does not extend to most rural areas (Ndongsok and Ruppel 2018).

The state has strong control over both telecoms and the media which it uses to the disadvantage of its citizens, for example by bandwidth throttling, internet shutdowns, and sanctioning private telecoms providers and TV channels. These tactics are particularly focused on anglophone regions. Digital advances in Cameroon have usually been located in these regions (for example at 'Silicon Mountain' in Buea) so this antipathy to anglophone culture holds the whole of Cameroon back digitally (Atabong 2019).

There are major restrictions on free speech online. Laws on terrorism and cybercrime make it a serious offence to share information that the sharer cannot prove to be true, which places a high burden on netizens. Using electronic communications for same-sex relationships is also illegal.

Cameroon is one of several African countries implicated in recent Russian disinformation campaigns, apparently recruiting local people with genuine social media accounts (Ilyushina 2019). It is too early to know what the effects will be on Cameroonian online civic space, but it seems unlikely that the Cameroonian government has the technical knowledge to deal with this new and sophisticated threat, given its acknowledged weaknesses in the area of ICT (Digital Cameroon 2016).

Cybersecurity remains poor for institutions and individual users in Cameroon. The country scored only 0.432 (out of 1) in the latest Global Cybersecurity Index (ITU 2018).

The government of Cameroon clearly views digital space as more of a threat than an opportunity, which is in line with its authoritarian view on civil rights in general, particularly in relation to minorities. The government deliberately restricts citizens' access to the internet, as well as carrying out surveillance

of social media. A lack of transparency means that, as yet, not very much is known about where the government is sourcing its surveillance technology from, although CAMTEL's telecommunications equipment is sourced from its principal Chinese partners (APC and Hivos 2014). In 2019, Cameroon's government launched a video-surveillance command centre built and implemented by Chinese technology company Huawei. The centre runs off Huawei equipment and provides connectivity for the transmission of footage (itweb.africa 2019).

Despite these difficulties, Cameroonians who are active online, and Cameroonian emigrants, have made use of social media to challenge the status quo and hold the government to account, using Twitter hashtags such as #BringBackOurInternet and #KeepItOn (#KeepItOn 2018) to highlight internet outages, and #anglophonecrisis to report the ongoing tensions and violence in the anglophone regions. Some net-savvy citizens have been able to maintain their internet access using virtual private networks (VPNs) but these are expensive and must be downloaded before shutdowns occur in order to be effective.

Deliberate disinformation is a new threat that is not yet fully understood, by the government or by citizens. Social media, and Facebook in particular, have been a means of spreading 'fake news', hate speech, and inflammatory posts, worsening the situation between separatist or federalist anglophones and the francophone regime, security services, and supporters (McAllister 2018). The government has responded by passing a law criminalising hate speech, with higher penalties for hate speech spread via media (#defyhatenow 2020), but they fail to implement this consistently. Human rights lawyer, Felix Agbor Balla, said: 'The problem with government is that they politicise it – they use it when it is convenient for them. When people use [hate speech] against people who are against the government – nobody cares' (Ekonde 2020).

The Cameroon government itself has recently made use of a number of USA-based PR companies in an attempt to garner political support for the regime in Washington, but they do not appear to be targeting citizens within Cameroon so far (Foute 2019a). In 2018, it also tried to persuade Facebook to remove anti-government 'fake news' even when that news had been verified by international organisations such as Amnesty International (Atabong 2018).

In this environment, citizens need education in assessing and using information that is disseminated online in order to judge its veracity, and education about what constitutes hate speech. Facebook has so far failed in its duty of care in this area, but government censorship is not a viable alternative.

6. Digital rights during Covid-19

Cameroon is the country in central Africa that has been worst affected by Covid-19, despite implementing typical restrictions on freedom of movement and association such as prohibiting gatherings of more than 50 people, encouraging e-meetings, and closing ports and airports to passengers (Republic of Cameroon Prime Minister's Office 2020). Whether any extra restrictions on liberty will continue once the pandemic is over remains to be seen.

The government's handling of the crisis has been marred by a double scandal. In June, Human Rights Watch called on Cameroon's government to disclose why funds for tackling the virus had not been released from the Health Solidarity Fund. Since 1993, public primary care facilities have been obliged to pay 10 per cent of their monthly revenues to the fund (Human Rights Watch 2020a). Then in July 2020, human rights groups warned that the US\$40m solidarity fund raised by civilians had been embezzled, including 4,000 bags of rice that were illegally sold (Kindzeka 2020). Citizens placed pressure upon the government by starting a Twitter campaign using the hashtag **#BringBackOurRice**, along the lines of #BringBackOurInternet. The government initially denied all allegations but has since ordered an investigation.

The effect of the pandemic on digital rights has been mixed. CAMTEL, Orange, and MTN have all offered reduced prices for internet data to help people stay connected during lockdown, keeping online space open. On the other hand, personal data are under threat, with information being shared online about people who arrived in the country and were suspected of having the virus. The government also abused its power to try to get telecoms companies to block payments to a relief fund coordinated by an opposition party (Paradigm Initiative 2020).

Tracking and tracing infection is likely to be an important part in the next phase of controlling the virus. So far, the Cameroon government has not implemented any form of digital track-and-trace, relying instead on public awareness messages. However, should the government start collecting data about citizens for virus control purposes, the level of corruption in Cameroon means that there is a danger it would be retained after the crisis passes and/or used for other purposes, to the detriment of its citizens.

7. Conclusion

The major challenges to both civic space and digital rights in Cameroon come from the autocratic government's tight grip on discourse, both online and in the press. International observers have noted major infractions of freedom of speech, freedom of association, and the freedom of the press, despite Cameroon being a signatory of many human rights treaties. Abuses against ordinary citizens, and especially against writers and journalists, create an environment where using electronic or traditional media to voice dissenting opinions can come with a high cost. It is not reasonable to expect people to risk their freedom or their lives to enter civic space in Cameroon. Therefore, international pressure on the Cameroonian government to deal with its record of human rights abuses is essential to digital rights in Cameroon. The government has softened its stance lately, launching investigations into both abuses by soldiers and embezzlement of funds. This may be an indication that it is prepared to take action to be welcomed back into the international fold.

Lack of access to the internet is also a huge problem for Cameroonians when it comes to exercising their digital rights. Again, the root of the problem is government control. Although the Cameroon government does not have a monopoly on telecoms, its high level of control over all providers restricts meaningful competition that might bring down prices. The government has failed miserably to achieve the aspirations in its 2016 *Strategic Plan for a Digital Cameroon by 2020* (Digital Cameroon 2016) and has in fact taken backwards steps by bandwidth throttling and shutdowns. National and international pressure must be placed upon the government to prioritise citizens' access to fast, affordable internet. In 2020, this is an essential requirement for taking part in civic space and being part of the international community. Better use of digital resources could also be an advantage to the functioning of the government, if it could manage to see the internet as not merely a threat but also an opportunity.

For netizens in Cameroon, current priorities are education about, and access to, VPNs. These are essential to circumvent government shutdowns of the internet or of particular web-based services such as Twitter and WhatsApp. Cameroonians who are online should be encouraged to select and download a VPN before any shutdown occurs, so that they can continue to occupy the civic space and draw international attention to the situation. VPNs can be expensive to use (although often free to download) so it would be useful to develop an affordable VPN targeted at netizens of countries at risk from shutdowns.

Disinformation or 'fake news' has become a serious problem worldwide in recent years, particularly from malicious state actors. While there is as yet no evidence that the Cameroon government is targeting its citizens in this way, the fact that Cameroonian social media users have been implicated in Russian disinformation campaigns is a signal that Cameroonian citizens, and all netizens, need to be educated about this threat: what it is, how to spot it, what to do about it. Often the solution is as simple as checking the source of a news item or article via a basic online search. However, as 'fake news' becomes more complex, education from experts in this field will be more valuable. Attempts to get the social networks themselves to stem the problem have failed, so education on the ground will be essential, ideally both by digital means (to reach a digitally active audience) and also through in-school education, to reach the upcoming generation of internet users.

All of these suggestions would be valuable for Cameroon, but the uncomfortable truth is that not much progress is likely to be made while the anglophone crisis rages on. Efforts to build capacity within civic society, whether the educational or the private sector, are too precarious in what is effectively a one-party state with the ability, and the will, to shut off internet access overnight. With a highly corrupt government that is paranoid about terrorism, real and imagined, and prepared to use draconian laws against not only hostile militants but also impartial journalists, the civic space will not be a safe place for Cameroonians, and especially not for anglophones during the current crisis. Therefore, urgent diplomatic action is needed to bring about an end to the conflict and restore relations within Cameroon. Establishing internal security is the essential foundation for building an effective, accessible civic space in Cameroon.

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