The Unfreedom Monitor

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A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World
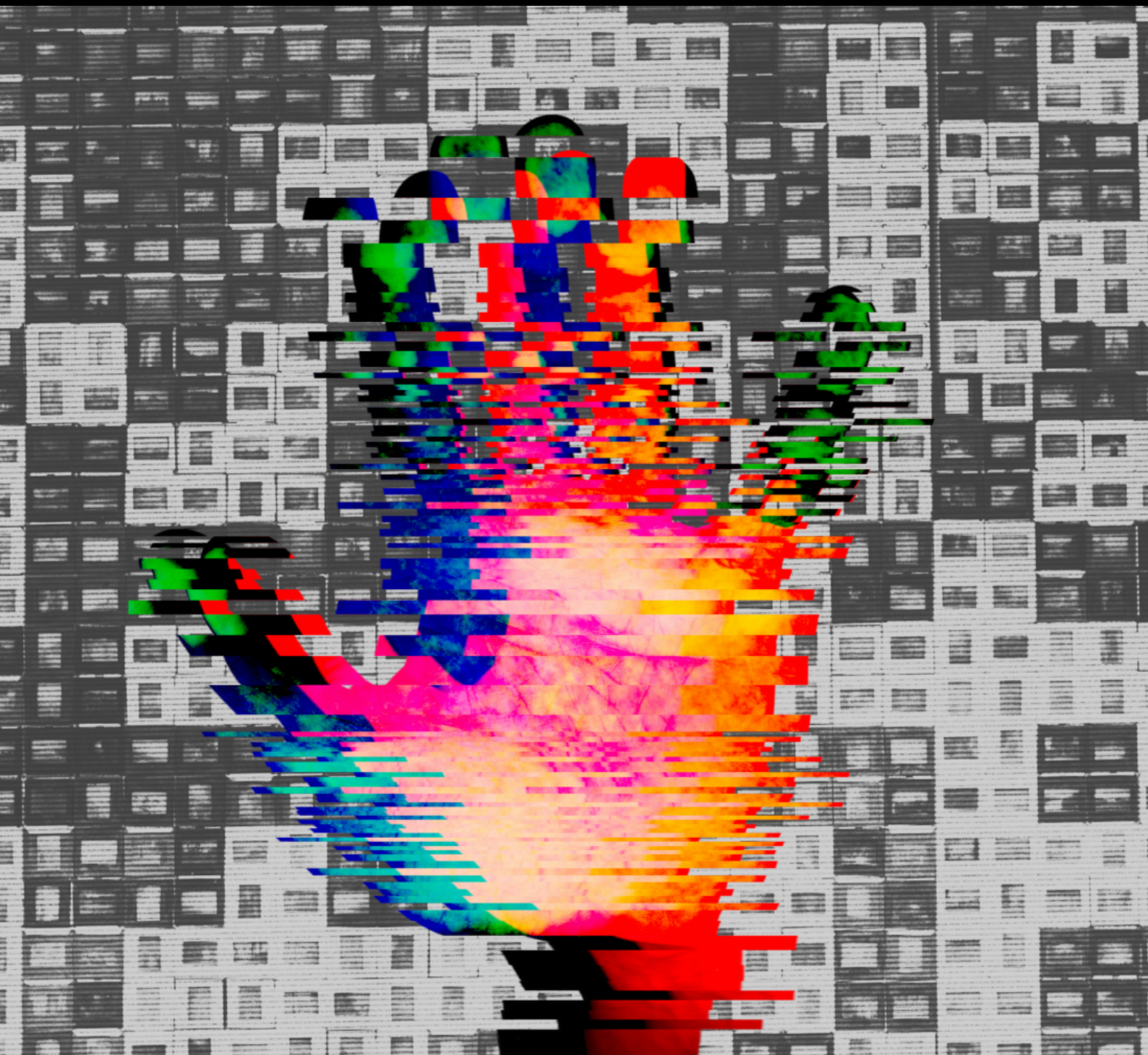
CAMEROON
COUNTRY REPORT

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Acknowledgements

Stichting Global Voices
Kingsfordweg 151
1043GR Amsterdam
The Netherlands
https://globalvoices.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cameroon is a country that is increasingly characterised by digital authoritarianism. The Cameroon government has been utilising digital tools to monitor and control citizens while equally limiting access to the internet and other digital technologies.

Technology has a major impact on democracy and public life in Cameroon. The widespread use of smartphones and social media has enabled political and social activists to organise more effectively and spread their messages to more people than ever before. However, it has also opened up opportunities for the spread of mis- and disinformation, which can lead to heightened levels of ethnic polarisation and gender-based violence. The internet also provides a platform for hate speech, which can lead to further social divisions.

The lack of regulation of social media and the internet has made it easier for individuals to share false information and spread hate speech, making it difficult for citizens to understand the truth and make informed decisions. According to Gikunda, while social media was used to mobilise anglophone Cameroonians, it also became a tool for manipulation and exposing violence and injustice. Hate speech in Cameroon is used as a tool to achieve political and material ends (e.g., polarising opinions, dehumanising opponents, exacerbating feelings of frustration and hate, and calling for violent action) (Gikunda).

In addition, the prevalence of fake news and online harassment has made it more difficult for women to engage in public discourse. This has hurt the representation of women in public life and politics.

The government has implemented several laws and regulations to restrict and limit the use of digital technologies, including the internet. The law on cybersecurity and cyber criminality on the website of the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, Minpostel in Cameroon states that anyone who publishes fake news is liable to a jail term and a fine (Minpostel, 2010). Using mobile phone and data service providers like MTN and Orange, the government, through the National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ANTIC), sends out messages that sound like a warning to anyone who would dare to publish fake news, saying publishing fake news is punishable by a fine and imprisonment.

Surveillance by the state is an open secret — the government uses digital technology to identify and target dissidents, monitor activities, and even arrest and imprison people for expressing their views online. Internet shutdowns, such as those in the Anglophone regions in 2017, and throttling during the 2018 elections, are clear tools of digital authoritarianism.

Furthermore, the government has used digital technology to clamp down on freedom of expression, with journalists, bloggers, and other citizens facing arrest, detention, or even death for expressing their views online. The government has used digital technology to promote its own messaging and censor opposing views, oppress minority groups, and target those belonging to certain ethnic and religious groups.

The government, through its role as protector, a guarantor of public peace and security, guardian of territorial integrity and the image of the country, seems to reinforce digital authoritarianism using arguments such as safety and security. The series of internet

disruptions in Anglophone regions before the 2018 election is one significant example (Ndongmo). However, on the opposite side, there are rights groups, civil society, and activists who condemn government action as a violation of freedoms and rights.

BACKGROUND

Cameroon is a Central African nation located in the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. It is bordered by Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Equatorial Guinea. It has a population of approximately 23 million people and a diverse economy, with its main exports being oil and natural gas. Once a German colony, the modern country was administered by the French and British after the Germans were ousted in 1919. French Cameroun gained independence in 1960 followed a year later by British Southern Cameroons, which joined French Cameroun to create the federation named Republic of Cameroon.

It is also believed that government authoritarianism fueled the Anglophone conflict, initially denying the problem existed and later not seeking effective solutions

In 1972, a new constitution was adopted that changed the country from a federal state to a unitary one, revoking the autonomy of the English-speaking parts of the country and giving more power to the president, leading to friction with the leaders of the erstwhile autonomous Anglophone region of Southern Cameroons. Neglect, marginalisation and the erosion of the terms of the federation are the root causes (Agwanda and Asal) of the ongoing Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, with devastating effects.

Cameroon, described as an authoritarian regime (Morse and Suh), has relied on some factors to survive. While a constitutional amendment of the 1972 constitution in 1996 gave the president and the regime the leeway to retain power, technology has played an important role in maintaining a firm grip on the population.

This came to the fore in 2017 in the heat of the Anglophone conflict, when the government decided to control information that circulated online. After protests by Anglophone dissidents were suppressed in 2017, some dissidents launched a guerilla campaign against the government, which responded by sending the army in. The internet was shut down in the Anglophone regions for three months in January, curtailing access to social media and the sharing of information (Association of Progressive Communication). Again, in October 2017, the government shut down internet access in the Anglophone regions to contain the initiatives planned around October 1, considered by dissident leaders of Southern Cameroons as their Independence Day ("New Internet Shutdown Ordered in Cameroon.").

The government was criticised by digital rights groups such as Internet Sans Frontières and Access Now. It is also believed that government authoritarianism fueled the Anglophone conflict, initially denying the problem existed and later not seeking effective solutions (Pandya). During his end of year address in 2020 President Biya maintained that peace was returning in the crisis-hit Anglophone regions in the northwest and southwest, an indication that he did not know the reality on the ground (Orock). The government responded by first refusing to admit that there was a problem, and later offered cosmetic solutions such as the national dialogue whose recommendations have not been implemented.

> *The prevalence of misinformation, disinformation and fake news on social media has also affected gender-based violence in Cameroon. It has enabled people to spread false information about women, which can lead to increased levels of violence against them.*

Cameroon is signatory to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), all of which guarantee the right to free expression. By restricting the rights to freedom of opinion, information, and expression ("New Internet Shutdown Ordered in Cameroon."), the state is violating international agreements. Also, the African Union stresses that the rights people enjoy offline should be promoted online (African Union).

In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, tools to bypass internet blocking have become technologies of freedom that facilitate unfettered access to the internet despite censorship (Okunoye). The population of the two Anglophone regions turned to VPNs and other apps to view content online (Access Now, 2018).

However, internet shutdowns are not the only events that illustrate the power of communications controls in public life in Cameroon. Ordinary citizens, journalists, and human rights defenders have been jailed for their posts on social media. A glaring example is the sentencing of Clement Ytembe Bonda, a plantation worker in Njombe Penja, to a one-year jail term and a fine of XAF 500,000 (USD 815). Co-workers recorded a video of Bonda expressing discontent at the embezzlement of COVID-19 funds using explicit language against the president and government ministers. He was irked by the fact that he and others were working in the plantation from dusk to dawn for a meagre stipend while ministers ended up lining their pockets with public funds. The video went viral on social media in June 2020, and Bonda was tried within two weeks, and imprisoned for 'outrage at the head of state and public authority' and for spreading fake news on social media.

The prevalence of misinformation, disinformation and fake news on social media has also affected gender-based violence in Cameroon. It has enabled people to spread false information about women, which can lead to increased levels of violence against them.

The internet also provides a platform for hate speech, which can lead to further social divisions. Hate speech has been used to target certain ethnic, religious, and political groups in Cameroon, leading to increased levels of violence and discrimination. This has had a detrimental effect on democracy, as it has made it more difficult for citizens to engage in constructive dialogue and to work together to foster change. The use of the terms "Bamenda" (stupid people) for people from the northwest, "Kam no go"(meaning "settlers not going back to their region of origin") for northerners who are settlers in the southwest, "frog" for Francophones, and "Anglofools" for Anglophones was exacerbated by the spread of the internet. Hate speech has reinforced ethnicity and division in Cameroon.

Elections have always been polarised along ethnic lines. During the 2018 parliamentary elections, the government limited the population's access to the internet (Gwagwa). The government's use of internet disruptions has greatly impacted the free and fair electoral process, because they "undermine the capabilities of election candidates — particularly the opposition — to campaign and exchange ideas. They also prevent voters from

accessing information, weaken trust in the electoral process, and obstruct the efforts of those documenting irregularities" (Access Now, 2023). This is made worse by the rampant spread of disinformation, such as posts from the diaspora claiming that President Biya had died (CIPESA).

CAMEROON'S POLITICAL HISTORY

Cameroon was first colonised by Germany, and was later partitioned between France and Britain, following Germany's defeat in World War I. French Cameroun got its independence in 1960 and British Southern Cameroons in 1961 by joining the French part to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon under the first president Amadou Ahidjo.

Under Ahidjo, a referendum was held to abolish the federal system of government for a United Republic of Cameroon. In 1975 the national flag with two stars was changed to one star. Ahidjo ruled till 1982 when he handed over power to President Biya who has been in power for 40 years.

President Biya began his term with an economic crisis, turning to foreign aid and privatisation in order to solve it. Groups from the English speaking side demanded more autonomy and the Southern Cameroons National Council pushed to create their own country, Ambazonia.

Cameroon has a politically centralised government where power is concentrated with the president, who rules by decree and the parliament tends to turn his bills into law, despite the system provided for in the constitution. No private member bill has ever been accepted in the Cameroon parliament; ruling party parliamentarians are in the majority and do not question government sponsored bills.

The Cameroonian constitution lays out three arms of government, the judiciary, legislative, and executive, but Rohan Pandya hints that, according to article 37 (3) of the revised 1972 constitution, "The president is the sole guarantor of judicial independence, inhibiting any sense of separated governmental powers" (Pandya). Even though Biya is a democratically-elected president, certain aspects of election irregularities indicate that elections are merely a formality. The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Party (CPDM) has been in power since 1985. Press freedom is theoretical: "State media is under strict government control, while private media outlets are vocal and critical but often face intimidation" (BTI).

The electoral system in Cameroon, though evolving over the years, seems to have serious flaws such as the absence of a single ballot paper that helps to avoid abuses in the electoral process. Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), the election body, does not proclaim results; instead, the Constitutional Council, whose members are appointed by President Biya, is in charge. Also, the electoral code does not address the fundamental shortcomings of the present electoral system aforementioned (Socialist International). With the southwest and northwest of the country in crisis, during the 2018 elections, the military allegedly played an important role in the voting and allegedly stuffed ballots (Gramer), given that the population was afraid for their safety and did not come out to vote, as observed in the crisis-hit northwest and southwest regions (OCHA Services). Local government authorities and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation control the elections, financing and registering the candidates, and help to transmit voting material and results,

thus rendering the process suspicious, dowsing the credibility of ELECAM and casting doubt on its ability to work independently. It is telling that, in a country of about 25 million people, only about six million registered to vote, an indication the population has lost faith in the ballot box ([Verjee](#)).

Cameroon has witnessed two highly contested elections. Tension sparked in 1992 with the ruling CPDM and the Social Democratic Front (SDF) as the main contenders. Until 1990, the CPDM was the only political party. The SDF claimed to have won the first multiparty elections. Observers agreed the election was flawed and could not guarantee legitimacy.

After the 2018 presidential elections, opposition leader Maurice Kamto of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) party claimed victory was stolen ([Maclean](#)). Kamto organised peaceful demonstrations to contest election results, claiming the election had been rigged and was arrested alongside other party supporters. He was later put on house arrest. Observers say the ruling CPDM resorted to illegal means to retain power ([National Democratic Institute](#)). The inability of the authorities to provide the results of the polling unit was said to be a major hitch.

One of the major challenges Cameroon is facing is power transition. No opposition party has won elections since President Biya came to power. Presently, the Frankists Movement and the ruling CPDM party bigwigs are working underground to ensure Franck Biya takes over from his father, the president ([Kindzeka](#)).

In recent years, Cameroon has been subject to sanctions imposed by the European Union, and the United States. The sanctions have targeted individuals and companies involved in human rights abuses and corruption. The US removed Cameroon from the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) in January 2020 for its human rights violations — extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention and torture by Cameroonian security forces ([Allegrozzi](#)).

The impact of international financial organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF on Cameroon has been profound. Since the country's independence in 1960, the World Bank and IMF have provided considerable financial and technical assistance to Cameroon to help promote economic and social development ("[The World Bank in Cameroon: Overview](#)"). This assistance has been used to finance projects in the areas of health, education, infrastructure, and economic growth.

In return, these organisations have imposed certain conditions on the country that have had a significant influence on the way Cameroon is governed. These conditions were intended to ensure that their assistance is used effectively. Structural adjustment policies (SAPs), as they are called, are designed to promote fiscal discipline and economic liberalisation in recipient countries. Cameroon also had to privatise its state-owned companies, liberalise the banking sector, and reduce public spending.

These institutions have encouraged Cameroon to pursue a free market economy — which has led to an increase in foreign investment in the country — decrease its public spending, and reduce its budget deficit. The privatisation of state-owned companies has had a major effect on the job market, leading to increased unemployment and inequality ([Konings](#)). The World Bank and IMF have also limited the government's ability to implement social welfare

programs, leading to a decrease in the quality of life for many citizens. The population reacted with protests, especially in the southwest, after the privatisation of the Cameroon Development Corporation ([Konings](#)).

On February 1, 2023, Cameroon increased the prices of fuel on the IMF's recommendation that the government stop subsidising petroleum products. The Cameroon government and the IMF reached an agreement to reduce all subsidies in the country; in exchange, the IMF is expected to grant Cameroon a credit line of USD 74.6 million ([IMF](#)).

STATUS OF THE PRESS

Given the bilingual nature of the country, the main languages of the media are French and English but there are also programs in Cameroon Pidgin English and community radios broadcast in some local languages depending on the region. There are a few strong regional papers like L'Oeil du Sahel that favour the opinion of the northern regions. La Voix du Centre and L'Ouest Echos are other examples of regional newspapers in Cameroon.

The Cameroon government prides itself on having the freest press in Africa with the proliferation of about 400 media houses in the country ([Amabo](#)). But the press is subtly gagged. It is an open secret that critical and independent journalists in Cameroon risk being arrested and detained for doing their job ([Freedom House](#)). This comes to the fore with the conflict in the Anglophone regions where journalists are constantly harassed for reporting on human rights abuses. Samuel Wazizi was arrested on August 2, 2019, and later died in custody. Kingsley Fomunyuy Njoka is still in prison. Mimi Mefo fled Cameroon.

The 2022 report from Freedom House says that journalists are harassed by the Cameroon Media Council that calls journalists to order on the request of the government, and questions their reports. One recent case ([Djaleu](#)) is that of Serge Alain Ottou, journalist at a local TV station Equinox, who was summoned to answer for having a guest who said President Biya was the worst thing that happened to Cameroon on a TV debate.

Mbani Zogo, a journalist and presenter of the popular program "Embouteillage" (Traffic Jam) was kidnapped in the capital Yaoundé on January 17, 2023, and was found dead four days later. When found, his body was in an advanced state of decomposition. In his last appearance, he talked about the alleged corruption and the embezzlement of public funds, naming a businessman. Zogo's death has got journalists talking about their safety and the state of freedom of expression in Cameroon.

The state broadcaster is the mouthpiece of the government and on no occasion is it critical of government action; rather, it reinforces the power of the state, and imposes blackouts on some critical issues. Blogging is popular and some bloggers have turned into influencers as a result of their huge following online. Obstacles to a freer press in Cameroon are: access to public information and lack of financial stability, since it is mostly funded by government aid, which is only given to outlets that support the state perspective ([Reporters sans frontières](#)).

COUNTRY INTERNET PATTERN AND PENETRATION

Since the introduction of the internet and subsequent use of social media in Cameroon in early 2000, there has been a steady increase in the number of users per year. By December 2000, Cameroon had 20,000 internet users and by June 2019, the number of internet users in Cameroon increased drastically to 6,128,422, with Facebook alone adding more than half of the total number of internet users and subscribers (3,473,000) between 2006 and 2019 (Mallet).

In 2020, 38 percent of the population accessed the internet, up from 0.25 percent in 2000 (Kamer). Facebook is one of the most popular network sites in Cameroon according to DefyHateNow Cameroon (Mallet).

Cameroon's mobile market has come a long way over the last two decades. With 14 million mobile subscribers who make up 52 percent of the population, mobile is the primary connectivity channel in Cameroon (Ajadi and Acland). As of March 2021, nearly 67 percent of all mobile subscribers were using mobile internet services which means that 34 percent of the population are mobile internet subscribers ("Navigating the Tech Ecosystem in Cameroon").

A 2015 report by the Web Foundation found that in Cameroon only 36 percent of women compared to 45 percent of men were internet users. The key factors inhibiting women's access to the internet and digital devices in Cameroon include literacy levels, cost relative to income, access to devices, perceived relevance and usefulness, lack of time, and poor infrastructure (Kamer).

The internet is provided by the government and the private sector, but the government has a greater share and control. Blogging is popular, as are social media sites. During the Africa Cup of Nations hosted by Cameroon, the government slowed the internet, as observed by journalists covering the event who were unable to send reports. This is supposedly part of security measures when President Biya is present.

The tech ecosystem experienced significant growth in 2018 and 2019. Once the internet was restored in the Anglophone regions after the shutdown, many start-ups and entrepreneurs that had relocated to Douala or Yaoundé continued to operate in Anglophone and Francophone regions, which helped to expand the market ("Navigating the Tech Ecosystem in Cameroon").

METHODOLOGY

The Unfreedom Monitor combines the methodology used in Global Voices' previous work on media observatories with an in-depth analysis of the contextual issues around digital authoritarianism. The Civic Media Observatory (CMO) approach is primarily qualitative and looks beyond socio-technical causes to consider power analysis, offer a way to discuss effects, and emphasise what works as well as what is negative. It is a framework that can be consistently applied across a range of settings, to identify and contextualise both positive and disruptive developments, to explain the forces and motives underlying them, as well as the narrative framing devices that often require local knowledge to interpret and weigh. This method is particularly helpful in the case of countries, like Cameroon, where authoritarian trends are less direct and require contextual information.

This method allows us to compare, draw lessons, and consolidate learning about the trends, systems, and rules that influence what we know, and how we know it. The observatory includes datasets of media items, structured analysis of context and subtext, and a civic impact score that rates media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse.

This study focused on Cameroon has defined two main incidents related to digital authoritarianism that happened in the country in the last two years (2020–2022), and then a group of 15 media items related to each of the incidents was collected and analysed. The qualitative analysis of these 30 items in total was predefined for all the countries participating in this project, in this way a framework can be consistently applied across different national, political, and technological contexts. The items included publications by local and international news media, reports by independent organisations, and social media posts, particularly from Twitter and Facebook.

The first incident involves a plantation worker, Clement Ytembe Bonda, who was locked up at the Mbanga Prison in the Littoral Region of Cameroon in 2020. Bonda's friends Andre Boris Wamen and Flavy Kamou Woume recorded him cursing the president and government ministers. In the video, which went viral on social media, Bonda expressed anger at the alleged embezzlement of XAF 180 billion (USD 226 million) of COVID-19 funds. His anger stemmed from the fact that, as a plantation worker, he earned XAF 32,000 (USD 52) a month toiling on the plantation for long hours, only for government officials to sit in air conditioned offices and embezzle money. The IMF disbursed USD 226 million to Cameroon to address the impact of COVID-19. Bonda got wind that the money was embezzled, which prompted him to record the video. Bonda and his friends were arrested and jailed for "outrage against the head of state" and the propagation of fake news on social media. A member of parliament organised lawyers to support the young men because, according to him, there was a need to defend their rights and the general freedom of expression. The Mbaga court sentenced the three plantation workers to a one-year jail term. Andre Boris Wamen and Flavy Kamou Woume regained freedom a year later while nothing has been said about Clement Bonda, who we assume remains in prison.

The second has to do with imprisoned journalist Kingsley Fomunyuy Njoka, languishing in the Yaounde Kondengui Prison under charges of terrorism, although he was arrested for his reports and social media posts on the Anglophone crisis. Njoka, before his arrest, was a freelance journalist, a contributor to a program on one of Cameroon's local TV stations, CANAL 2, and L'Effort Camerounaise, a Catholic newspaper. It has become a trend to

arrest journalists reporting on the Anglophone conflict, to label them terrorists, try them in military court and jail them, as was the case with Njoka.

In the selection process, the researcher looked for media items by government officials, public media, journalists, and civil society leaders. These items were analysed by the researcher in terms of sources, narrative frames, subtext, context, reactions, popularity, and a civic impact score that categorised the media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse and society at large. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed with the editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers participating in this project.

The crucial research questions were: how does digital authoritarianism in Cameroon work and how are digital technologies being used by the government to advance its political interests while harming citizens' rights, like privacy or freedom of expression? To answer this question, four critical dimensions were considered: data governance, speech, access, and information. Another question was: what are the main contours of digital authoritarianism in Cameroon and what are the pro- and anti-state media narratives? To evaluate this aspect, three important elements were included: motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism.

The study was limited by a few factors. To begin with, while qualitative case studies have their value, it is not always straightforward to generalise from them to the populace at large. Time frame and capacity issues mean that we did not manage to access all of the narrative frames available. It was a challenge to find items that were supportive of pro-government frames, which could be explained by the fact that pro-government media organs turn a blind eye to certain issues that are critical of the state.

This study constitutes a significant step in analysing the characteristics of digital authoritarianism in Cameroon , where the Cameroonian government seems to copy other mechanisms and methods used by authoritarian governments when it comes to internet control, self censorship and intimidation. Even though this study has limitations, it provides a framework and key aspects for future research that can include some statistical analyses of social media narratives, the use of commercial surveillance, and the use of law to undermine freedom of expression. This dataset can also be used as the basis for policy recommendations, awareness campaigns, and cross-border consultations.

MAPPING THE COUNTRY CHALLENGES WITH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Digital authoritarianism has a huge impact on governance and public life in Cameroon. The government is using data surveillance to monitor what is written online. Once an online post is dedicated to criticising the government, the person responsible is tracked and jailed.

Over the past decade, the development and spread of digital technology have enabled authoritarian regimes to further extend and consolidate their rule. In addition to the traditional methods of repression such as censorship, surveillance, and control of the media, digital authoritarianism refers to the use of digital technology to manipulate, control, and influence public opinion.

The incidents examined in this research — a plantation worker jailed for insulting the head of state, and a journalist jailed for reports and social media posts — are clear examples that show that digital authoritarianism exists in Cameroon. The justifications the government advances are often public peace and security, and the demand for respect of the president as an institution.

> *The government is silencing dissenting voices and clamping down on opposition political parties; there is no freedom of assembly, and the right to public protest is restricted.*

Findings from the Unfreedom Monitor show that the Cameroonian state has strong control over freedom of expression and opinion. Though freedom of expression and opinion are fundamental rights, the state controls the boundaries of these freedoms. For example, authorities and institutions are not to be criticised. The main narrative frame that emerged from the research is that "the government must not clamp down on dissent." Another supporting one is that the government is using a broad definition of fake news to criminalise free speech.

Some other authoritarian practices are internet shutdowns, which were used in the Anglophone regions in 2017. During the 2018 elections, the government resorted to internet throttling. Journalists who report from the Anglophone regions have been jailed ([Media Defence](#)). Several journalists have been to jail and come out; some are still languishing in jail and some have fled Cameroon. The government is silencing dissenting voices and clamping down on opposition political parties; there is no freedom of assembly, and the right to public protest is restricted.

DATA GOVERNANCE

The country has been making significant progress in this sector in recent years, with the government implementing several initiatives to promote the adoption of digital technologies. This includes the National Digital Strategy that outlines the government's vision for the digital transformation of Cameroon ("Strategic Plan for a Digital Cameroon by 2020"). The Ministry of Post and Telecommunication has also developed a National Data Strategy that outlines how data can be used to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services.

The National Data Strategy also emphasises the importance of data governance in Cameroon by creating awareness about data management systems and securing data from malicious attacks. Data governance is important to ensure the proper use of data and to protect the privacy of individuals. Furthermore, data governance is essential to ensure that data is used ethically and securely.

In the period of internet shutdowns in the Anglophone regions, it was revealed that the government had been surveilling the people. Minette Libom Li Likeng, Minister of Post and Telecommunication, testified to Deutsche Welle that the government employs different tools to monitor internet users online ("Internet Back in Anglophone Cameroon, but More Surveillance?"), saying, "I will not disclose the methods here, but I will say that the government is organised because there is a whole agency that is equipped for that. Moreover, all our police forces have tracking and Control as in all countries."

Two laws in Cameroon target fake news: the cyber criminality law and the law on terrorism. The government determines what constitutes fake news. In 2018, journalist Mimi Mefo reported that an American missionary was killed by government forces in the northwest crisis-hit region. The journalist might have had sources to justify the claim but was arrested and jailed for spreading false information (O'Grady). More recent is the case of Clement Ytembe Bonda, a plantation worker whose case is described above. Meanwhile, the national telephone agency sends SMSes to users to remind them of the consequences of spreading false information.

SPEECH

Cameroonians are free to air opinions as long as they don't criticise the head of state, state officials, and people close to power (World Intellectual Property Organisation). This means freedom of expression has a limit. According to Freedom House, Cameroon scored 15/100 in the 2022 Freedom Index, and is classified as "not free." Cameroon scored 6/40 on political rights and 9/60 on civil liberties (Freedom House). Independent and critical journalists are subject to pressure and run the risk of being detained or arrested because of their profession. Journalist Sebastien Ebala, was handed a two-year prison term in September 2021 for "contempt" of the president (Bala and Ebala). Ebala has been in custody since 2020, for urging Biya to step down and for endorsing an anti-government march. This ties in with one of the incidents in this research, about the arrest of Clement Ytembe Bonda.

The government decides what information the citizens are privy to. For example, an audit on the COVID-19 funds has never been made public; it was revealed only to the National Assembly. Getting public information from government officials is a herculean task. Sometimes state officials say they are not authorised to give information or the minister has to give the green light to talk. Journalists are harassed to provide the sources of their information. Kingsley Fomunyuy Njoka was arrested in 2020 for his social media posts and reports because authorities had the impression that he was privy to information from the armed groups (Committee to Protect Journalists). The police arrested five media professionals — Tah Javis, Tebong Christian, Lindovi Ndjio, Roderique Ngassi, and Polycarpe Essomba — for covering the opposition CRM political party protest (Article 19).

Amnesty International condemned the state's crackdown on people simply for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, targeting supporters of the main opposition party, human rights defenders, protesters from the Anglophone region, as well as members of a social movement (Amnesty International).

ACCESS

Internet access in Cameroon is relatively low compared to other African countries, and the government is often seen as a major obstacle to connectivity (CIPESA). Despite efforts to increase access, only 14.2 percent of the total population had access to the internet, according to a 2019 report from the International Telecommunication Union. However, the World Bank puts the population of internet users in Cameroon at 38 percent in 2020. Cameroon is 126th out of the 189 countries surveyed in terms of internet access ("Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - Cameroon | Data."). The government has made some efforts to encourage internet access, but the results have been limited. The majority of Cameroonians still do not have access to the internet, which has led to a lack of economic and educational opportunities for many people in the country.

In general, the government of Cameroon has been slow to embrace the internet and has been reluctant to invest in it. The government has been criticised for its lack of support for connectivity and its failure to create a comprehensive national strategy for internet access. There has been some progress in recent years, however. In 2017, the government announced the National Broadband Plan (Minpostel, 2017), which aims to increase access to the internet by providing tax incentives to mobile phone companies and internet service providers. The plan also aims to reduce the cost of internet access by introducing new technologies, such as fibre optic cables, and by encouraging private investment.

Access to the internet in Cameroon is also hindered by a lack of infrastructure. The country has a relatively low number of internet service providers and the existing infrastructure is often unreliable and slow (Alliance for Affordable Internet). In addition, the cost of internet access is relatively high compared to other countries. This is due in part to the government's policy of imposing a 20 percent tax on internet services. The government has also been criticised for not investing enough in infrastructure, such as fibre optics, which would improve internet speeds.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, several other factors contribute to the low rate of internet access in Cameroon. One of the main issues is the lack of electricity in some parts of the country. In addition, the cost of internet access is high, and this limits the ability of people to afford it. The government introduced a phone tax to be paid by everyone who purchases a phone in 2021 and Cameroonians took to social media with the hashtag #EndPhoneTax, which forced the government to back off.

The lack of digital literacy is also a major hindrance to internet access. Many people in Cameroon do not have the skills or knowledge to effectively use the internet (CIPESA). This is due in part to a lack of education and training, as well as a lack of access to technology. The internet is interrupted as cables are stolen, and it is heavily taxed in the 2023 finance law.

INFORMATION

Misinformation and disinformation have become increasingly prevalent in Cameroon. This has come to the fore with the Anglophone conflict as non-state actors share what they want the population to hear, and the population believes it (Gikunda). This is largely due to the proliferation of social media and other digital communication platforms, which have allowed the rapid spread of false information. The lack of robust media literacy programs, limited access to reliable news sources, and the prevalence of political and religious tensions have all contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the country.

MOTIVES

The main issues that inspire the authorities to clamp down on digital rights are numerous. The state claims freedom of expression is not an absolute right, that journalists who criticise the government are enemies. The authorities claim the need to protect the image of the country in the international community. The clamp down on the digital space also helps hide some truths from the population. Protection of public spaces, and preserving public peace and security are other reasons for the government to justify clamping down on the public space.

People with dissenting voices, opposition party members, and residents of the Anglophone regions, are targets. Sovereignty is another argument that the state pushes to reinforce control of the territory, putting forth the importance of dissuading secession.

> *The lack of robust media literacy programs, limited access to reliable news sources, and the prevalence of political and religious tensions have all contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the country.*

METHODS

Internet shutdowns and throttling are used to keep internet users in check and prevent them from sharing messages the government considers harmful.

Data governance, especially online surveillance, tracking, and control by the police, is another method used to keep the population in check. One way the government does this is by sending out mass messages to the population through local phone providers reminding them of the punishments that await them if they spread false information.

Controlling and limiting freedom of speech is another method used to maintain a firm grip on the population — freedom of expression, information, and opinion is curtailed as people who speak their minds, online and offline against the state, are arrested and jailed.

The government uses the security, police, gendarmes, army, courts and other ministries, territorial administration, governors, and divisional officers to further advance digital

authoritarianism. For example, the police track and arrest internet users who insult the state, as was the case with Clement Ytembe Bonda, and the time taken to try someone and pronounce a sentence depends on who is pushing the prosecution — Bonda was tried and sentenced within weeks, while journalists languish in jail awaiting trial.

RESPONSES

Journalists in Cameroon rarely report on authoritarian methods; they report on events as they happen and do not provide analysis. This is a safety measure, because when they do report, they are quickly tagged as opposition or terrorists. The population thinks journalists only report what is of interest to them and for certain favours (Reporters sans frontières). There is muted response to arrests; whenever there is a protest, government security forces retaliate with arrests.

There is a general belief that local civil society organisations in Cameroon are not serious, that some claim to work on a large number of issues and are out to make money. International civil society organisations are perceived to work well but the government discredits those that expose human rights abuses like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. During the 2018 presidential election fake Transparency International agents were paraded on national television, tainting the image of international civil society organisations (Transparency International).

> *Journalists in Cameroon rarely report on authoritarian methods; they report on events as they happen and do not provide analysis. This is a safety measure, because when they do report, they are quickly tagged as opposition or terrorists.*

The response to the internet shutdown has been the use of VPN technology to help users remain anonymous and get around internet blocking. Internet Sans Frontieres told users in the Anglophone regions to download the TOR browser and mobile applications called ORBOT and Psiphon to go around the shutdown. There is condemnation from rights groups on government actions in advancing digital authoritarianism.

Citizens under investigation look for methods to stay safe or even flee the country because at times arrests are made before investigations or justifications are provided.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Cameroon lagged in the introduction of the internet but has since understood the importance of the internet for the public and in governance. Having stayed in power for a long time, President Biya and the ruling CPDM party have used the internet to hold on to power. They use the internet to send out messages and propaganda, and also to clamp down on dissent and squash freedom of expression.

This research indicates that the government criminalises free speech by using a vague and broad definition of fake news, and clamps down on dissent and criticism, and that journalists who criticise the government are seen as enemies of the state — as in the case of the jailing of Kingsley Fomunyuy Njoka. This was evident during the conflict in the Anglophone regions in 2017. Internet throttling was also used during the 2018 elections (Gwagwa).

Online surveillance has been used to track down and arrest Cameroonians who criticise the president and state authority, citing the cybersecurity and cyber criminality law (CIPESA). Journalists have been arrested and jailed for social media posts (Kaledzi). The lucky ones have been freed, some fled the country but many more are still in jail in connection with issues related to freedom of expression, information, and opinion on and offline.

The government has always used territorial integrity or sovereignty, safeguarding public peace and security and the protection of the image of the state as justification for its actions. However, civil society organisations and rights groups have maintained that the government is crushing freedoms and human rights.

The two incidents that form the basis of this research point to the fact that digital authoritarianism is rife in Cameroon and affects governance and public life.

> *This research indicates that the government criminalises free speech by using a vague and broad definition of fake news, and clamps down on dissent and criticism, and that journalists who criticise the government are seen as enemies of the state*

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