

# State of Internet Freedom in Cameroon 2019

Mapping Trends in Government Internet Controls, 1999-2019

January 2020



# Table of Contents

---

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
	1.2 Aim of the Study	5
<b>2</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>COUNTRY CONTEXT</b>	<b>7</b>
	2.1 ICT Status	7
	2.2 Political Environment	8
<b>4</b>	<b>RESULTS</b>	<b>10</b>
	4.1 Key Trends of Internet Controls Over the Last Two Decades	10
	.1.1 Weaponising the Law to Legitimize Actions	10
	.1.2 Disrupting Networks – From SMS Censorship to Social Media Blockage to Internet Throttling	12
	.1.3 The Push Towards Determining Identity Amidst Poor Oversight	13
	.1.4 Enter the Era of Social Media and Data Taxation	14
	4.2 Key Positive Developments	15
	.2.1 Robust Advocacy and Push-back by Non-State Actors	15
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion and Recommendations</b>	<b>16</b>
	5.1 Conclusions	16
	5.2 Recommendations	17

# Credits ---

This research was carried out by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) with support of various partners.

This research documents the trends in government internet controls, 1999-2019 in Cameroon tracking key trends in recent years, analysing the key risk factors, and mapping notable developments on data protection and privacy legislation and violations, and users' understanding of protecting their privacy online. Other country reports for Botswana, Burundi, the DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The research was conducted as part of CIPESA's OpenNet Africa initiative ([www.opennetafrica.org](http://www.opennetafrica.org)), which monitors and promotes internet freedom in Africa.

CIPESA recognises Catherine Ndongmo as the main content contributors to this report.

The research was conducted with support from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

## **Editors**

Ashnah Kalemera, Victor Kapiyo, Paul Kimumwe, Lillian Nalwoga, Juliet Nanfuka, Edrine Wanyama, Wairagala Wakabi, PhD

## ***State of Internet Freedom in Cameroon 2019***

Published by CIPESA,

[www.cipesa.org](http://www.cipesa.org)

January 2020



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence  
<[creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0)>  
Some rights reserved.

# 1

# Introduction

---

## 1.1 Introduction

Internet censorship around the world is often linked to political instability and authoritarian regimes. Cameroon is no exception to this trend. Public surveillance has increased, with little accountability, while internet censorship and blockades have been a major issue in the country in recent years.

Meanwhile, several governments have created digital identity programmes that require citizens to provide detailed personal information, including biometric data, for identity documents and voter registration, as well as extensive personal data requirements as part of SIM card registration. In countries like Cameroon which lack robust policy and legal frameworks, such measures represent a real threat to digital freedoms.

Cameroon's journey has had its share of ups and downs over the last 20 years. Even as president Paul Biya strongly highlights Cameroon's growing importance as a major digital player to the outside world through his Digital Cameroon 2020 initiative,<sup>1</sup> reports of excessive government interference with digital freedom present a starkly contrasting picture. The government's tie-up with telecom giants like Huawei for the Digital Cameroon 2035 initiative signals a strong intent for digitisation of Cameroon. Internet access has become increasingly crucial to modern life, including in areas such as education and business. Likewise, the influence of social media has also increased exponentially, including in politics.

The intentions of the government became suspect when it ordered a 93-day complete internet shutdown that cost the country's economy USD 38.8 million.<sup>2</sup> An increasingly authoritarian and restrictive government approach to Internet access threatens progress and economic growth. Therefore, it is important to examine how much, and in what ways, Internet freedom has been restricted in Cameroon, and to look for solutions to improve the situation.

<sup>1</sup> *Strategic Plan for Digital Cameroon, MINPOSTEL* <http://bit.ly/2kfN1b7>

<sup>2</sup> *CIPESA, "Cost of Internet Shutdowns in Africa"* <http://bit.ly/2ksUREY>

## 1.2 Aim of the Study

This research sought to document the extent to which government controls of the digital space affect internet freedom in Cameroon since the year 1999. Specifically, the study traced the trends of government controls over the digital space between 1999 and 2019. The study focused on the proliferation of retrogressive or repressive policies and laws; surveillance and surveillance capacity of the government; digitisation programmes; censorship; demands on private sector actors; and new frontiers like the introduction of internet related taxes.

The study also sought to identify and recommend measures that different stakeholders – governments, civil society, technology companies, academia, media, researchers, and others, can take to secure internet freedom in Cameroon.

# 2 Methodology

---

The study employed a qualitative approach including literature review, policy and legal analysis, and key informant interviews with purposively selected respondents. Reports of previous studies, media reports, academic works, government documents, and other literature, were reviewed. The literature review generated an understanding of the developments in Cameroon.

The legal and policy analysis included a review of relevant laws, policies and practices in the various countries. Such laws and policies include those that govern the telecoms sector, the media, social media use, access to information, interception of communications, security and intelligence agencies, and security enforcement in general.

Key Informant Interviews were conducted with purposively selected respondents who included staff of telecoms firms, Internet Service Providers, the telecoms regulator, the ministry in charge of ICT, journalists, social media users, human rights defenders and activists, consumers' associations, academics and lawyers.

# 3

## Country Context

---

### 3.1 ICT Status

Having been connected to the internet since 1997, Cameroon has made steady but slow progress in internet penetration and access over the last 20 years. The number of internet users has grown from 20,000 people in 2000 to over 6.1 million by June 2019, representing a growth of 30,542 %.<sup>3</sup> The diffusion of mobile telephones and the internet in Cameroon over the last two decades has had a major impact on society. It has enabled access to information from outside the country and its dissemination outside official communication channels (which are often subject to censorship). It has also offered a platform for discussing and exchanging ideas, driving up innovation and entrepreneurship across Cameroon. In May 2016, the country's digital landscape was boosted by the launch of the National ICT Strategic Plan 2020,<sup>4</sup> which recognised the digital economy as a driver for development.<sup>5</sup> The country has registered increased investments in telecommunication and ICT infrastructure, including extension of the national optical fibre backbone to about 12,000 km, connecting 209 of the country's 360 sub-divisions, and also connecting to neighbouring countries such as Chad, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic and Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> However, users continue to endure slow connections and high fees at internet cafés. Cameroon has some of the highest bandwidth charges in West and Central Africa,<sup>7</sup> despite its access to the SAT3 submarine cable, which links the region to Europe. Cameroon ranks amongst the top five most expensive countries for monthly internet data bundles in Africa. Currently, the average cost of 1GB of data is 2,000 CFA (USD 3.4) per month, and with the proposed levy of 200 CFAs (USD 0.34) on software and application downloads, costs are expected to further increase.<sup>8</sup> Today, affordable access remains but a dream for most of the nation's 25 million citizens.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Cameroon National ICT Strategy Plan 2020 <https://bit.ly/39JMCbv>

<sup>5</sup> CIPESA, Overview of Cameroon's Digital Landscape; <https://bit.ly/2vGpBaX>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Freedom of Press <http://bit.ly/2m0Twpv>

<sup>8</sup> <https://mtn.cm/personal/internet/data-bundles/wanda-net/>

<sup>9</sup> InternetWorldStata <http://bit.ly/2lxtYzU>

In order to offer broadband connections to consumers, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Cameroon purchase access to international gateways through the SAT-3 international fibre optic submarine cable, which is managed by CAMTEL, the country's only fixed-line broadband operator. In October 2017, a dispute between two operators, Orange Cameroon and CAMTEL, deprived about five million Orange subscribers of internet access for about a week.<sup>10</sup> CAMTEL, which holds a national monopoly of optical fibre management, suspended Orange Cameroon's access to the said fibre for non-payment of an invoice of 1.6 billion CFA for "managed capacities" in security, which Orange Cameroon contests. According to the regulator, Agence de régulation des télécommunications (ART), both companies violated the provisions of laws governing their relationship and deprived many Cameroonians of their right to expression on the internet.

In 2010, the government enacted the eCommunications law, which states that every citizen "has the right to benefit from electronic communications services."<sup>11</sup> The same law establishes a Universal Service Access Fund, aimed at ensuring equal, quality and affordable access to services (Articles 27-29). Unfortunately, even with this law, access and affordability of the internet remains a challenge, especially among rural and poor communities.

Those who are connected to the Internet face high prices, paying 60% of Cameroon's average monthly income for a basic fixed-line broadband package.<sup>12</sup> There are a number of complex and interlinked reasons for persistently high prices:

- Limited international bandwidth, a monopoly in the fixed-line sector,
- Severely limited competition in the mobile sector,
- A regulator struggling to address consumer protection demands, and
- A weakened civil society.

## 3.2 Political Environment

Cameroon's ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), has dominated the country's political landscape since independence in 1960. Under the leadership of President Paul Biya since 1982, the party occupies 148 of the 180 seats in the National Assembly and 81 of the 100 Senate seats. Biya, 86, won the disputed election in November 2018, and is serving his seventh term as president. However, since October 2016, the country has been engulfed in a deadly conflict that arose following concerns from Northwest and Southwest regions around, long-held grievances over the use of the French language given its complicated colonial history, marginalisation by the central government, poor governance, inequitable political and social representation, the deterioration in the rule of law, corruption and the suppression of free speech and human rights. The presidential elections in October 2018 coupled with hate speech and fake news, especially on social media accelerated the crisis.

<sup>10</sup> *Business in Cameroon Magazine*, edition of October 13, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2ITpHHS>

<sup>11</sup> Article 4 of eCommunicatio Act [https://www.minpostel.gov.cm/images/Le\\_s\\_textes/Lois/Loi\\_2013-013\\_communications\\_electroniques.pdf](https://www.minpostel.gov.cm/images/Le_s_textes/Lois/Loi_2013-013_communications_electroniques.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2014: 'Case Study

*Internet and Broadband in Cameroon: Barriers to Affordable Access'*

[https://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/A4AI-Case-Study-Cameroon\\_FINAL1.pdf](https://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/A4AI-Case-Study-Cameroon_FINAL1.pdf)



However, except for the period between 1990 and 1992, when the opposition staged huge civil unrest rallies called “Opérations Villes Mortes” (Ghost Town initiatives), to force the head of state out of power, the country has enjoyed two decades of relative stability. This status quo was disrupted in February 2008, when riots over food prices (later called “hunger riots”) that erupted in several cities. The protest was marked by damage to infrastructure, vehicles, burning of shops and loss.

Additionally, over the past two years, the country has experienced extreme violence spurred by this linguistic split, between the Francophone and Anglophones, which has brought the country on the brink of civil war.<sup>13</sup> The crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, escalated on October 1st, 2017, when militant secessionist groups symbolically proclaimed the independence of Ambazonia<sup>14</sup> (A name created by the secessionists to designate the part of Cameroon for which they claim independence). The ensuing violence left dozens of protesters dead and over 100 injured.<sup>15</sup> In September 2019, the president announced his intention to hold a major “national dialogue” to put an end to the conflict between security forces and armed separatists from the anglophone minority in the west.

<sup>13</sup> Washington Post, *Divided by Language*; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/cameroon-anglophone-crisis/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://unpo.org/article/20710>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/130-cameroon-worsening-anglophone-crisis-calls-strong-measures>

# 4 Results

---

## 4.1 Key Trends of Internet Controls Over the Last Two Decades

This section traces the history, evolution, shifts and milestones of internet control measures in Cameroon, since 1999. The reason is to provide a deeper appreciation of intervening political and socio-economic considerations behind the different control measures introduced and applied by the Cameroonian government.

### 4.1.1 Weaponising the Law to Legitimise Actions

---

#### **Terrorism as a Justification**

The fight against terrorism has been used as a basis for introducing repressive laws. In response to the growing criticism from Cameroonians abroad for shutting down the internet in 2011, Issa Tchiroma, the Minister of Communications labelled the critics as ‘cyber-terrorists’ claiming that the government was a victim of cyber-terrorism. In November 2016, the President of the National Assembly also labelled internet users “traitors of the cyberspace” and called social media users “terrorists”. Government officials accused social media users of spreading rumours and being a threat to a peaceful Cameroon. The labelling of critics as terrorists points to the possible use of terrorism legislation against them.

#### **Silencing Dissent and Criticism through Criminalising Free Speech**

The systematic use of criminal law to prosecute and punish critics has become a trend in different countries. This includes the introduction of provisions in laws that require individuals to declare their sources of information, and criminalise false news.

For example, Section 78 of the 2010 Cybercrimes Act<sup>16</sup> criminalises the use of electronic communications or an information system to design, to publish or propagate a piece of information without being able to attest to its veracity or prove that the said piece of information is factual. Conviction attracts imprisonment for a maximum of two years or a fine of five million to ten million Central African Francs (CFA), or both.

<sup>16</sup> Cameroon 2010 Cybercrimes Law: <https://bit.ly/2S1xHsF>

On December 24, 2019, Cameroon enacted the law amending article 241 of the Penal Code.<sup>17</sup> This amendment related to the fight against hate speech and tribalism in Cameroon, now includes the offence of "Contempt of tribe or ethnicity". The Minister of Justice, Laurent Esso, justified the bill saying that the rise of tribalism in the public space, especially at the level of social networks, could compromise security, social cohesion and living together. Thus, people accused of hate speech of a tribal nature will be punished with one to two years imprisonment and a fine between 300,000 CFA and 3 million CFA. Sanctions are higher when it comes to civil servants, political and religious leaders, non-governmental organizations' delegates and journalists. For instance, a journalist found guilty of contempt of the tribe by the press, could pay a fine of up to 20 million CFA. The offence has not been used on a case yet, but is criticised, in particular on its lack of precision and definition of "tribalism acts" or "hate speech",<sup>18</sup> as it could be used to suppress freedom of expression online.

Notably, Cameroon has a history of media control and suppression. The government only allowed independent mass media to operate since the 1990s, and most media is state-owned. In 2014, the government continued its history of media suppression and several journalists including Guy Nsigue,<sup>19</sup> Zacharie Ndiomo<sup>20</sup> and Amungwa Tanyi Nicodemus<sup>21</sup> who were arrested and convicted for criminal defamation. Nicodemus, the publisher and editor of the private weekly *The Monitor*, was sentenced to four months in prison and ordered him to pay 10 million CFA (US\$21,000). This marked the beginning of a worrying trend. In January 2016, Cameroon journalists Baba Wame, president of the Association of Cyber Journalists, Rodrigue Tongue, a reporter who formerly worked for the privately owned daily *Le Messenger*, and Félix Cyriaque Ebole Bola, a reporter for the privately-owned daily *Mutations*, were charged before a Cameroon military court for failing to disclose information and sources that could harm national security.<sup>22</sup> The journalists who were first charged in October 2014, denied the charges, and faced jail terms of between one to five years and a fine between 50,000 and five million CFA. However, the trio was acquitted of the charges in October 2017.<sup>23</sup>

The Cameroonian authorities have also been accused of the December 2014 anti-terror law against journalists who report on the militants in the Far North region of Cameroon, and others who have reported on unrest in the English-speaking regions or are critical of president Paul Biya's administration.<sup>24</sup>

For instance, the Radio France Internationale (RFI) correspondent in Cameroon, Ahmed Abba, was arrested in Maroua in July 2015 and charged under the 2014 anti-terror law with complicity in and non-denunciation of terrorist acts. He is reported to have been tortured and held incommunicado for three months at a facility run by the Directorate General for External Research (DGRE) before being convicted on April 20, 2017 and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. On April 25, 2017, Ahmed Abba's lawyers appealed the conviction and sentence and by September 2017, he had appeared only once before the court.<sup>25</sup> In January 2018, the Minister of Justice is reported to have issued a directive to magistrates to "commit, after clear identification by the security services, to legally prosecute any person residing in Cameroon who uses social media to spread fake news"<sup>26</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon; Law No. 2019/020 of December 24, 2019 amending and supplementing some provisions of Law No. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016 on the Penal Code: <https://bit.ly/2P5PZl4>

<sup>18</sup> Cameroon Tribalism Bill: "You Can't Fight What You Don't Know": <https://bit.ly/3bNz3JT>

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Owona orders the arrest of sports journalist Guy Nsigue: <https://bit.ly/2P87VMd>

<sup>20</sup> 2014 prison census - Cameroon: 'Flash' Zacharie Ndiomo: <https://bit.ly/328MmAv>

<sup>21</sup> Cameroonian newspaper editor jailed for defamation: <https://bit.ly/2Hzfuaj>

<sup>22</sup> Three journalists face military trial in Cameroon: <https://bit.ly/39PhGH8>

<sup>23</sup> Cameroon: 03 years later, Rodrigue Tongue, Baba Wame and Félix Cyriaque Ebole acquitted by justice: <https://bit.ly/38lQHwK>

<sup>24</sup> CPI (2017): <https://bit.ly/2HALGKv>

<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International (2018): <https://bit.ly/3252oeD>

## 4.1.2 Disrupting Networks – From SMS Censorship to Social Media Blockage to Internet Throttling

---

Network disruptions, such as blocking of SMS, social media blockage and internet shutdowns, have emerged as a major technique through which various African governments have employed to stifle digital rights. The disruptions are mostly aimed at disabling effective communications and curtailing citizens' access information and thus limiting what the citizens can see, do, or communicate.

### Early Years of SMS Blockage

The year 2011 appeared to mark the start of a new and wide range of network disruptions that were related to elections. In March 2011, Cameroonian authorities suspended mobile Twitter and SMS services.<sup>27</sup> Telecom provider MTN Cameroon stated at the time, it had been informed that the suspension was because of what government officials termed “security reasons”. It appears that the government was wary of a possible Arab Spring Uprising in the county following the annual commemoration of the hunger riots first held in February 2008 dubbed the “martyr’s week” planned to take place when the suspension notice was issued.<sup>28</sup> The service was restored after 10 days, following protests by Cameroonians.

### Network Shutdowns Become Endemic

Across the continent, the year 2015 marked the start of widespread internet shutdowns. The practice has since been on the upswing well into the second half of 2019. Since 2015, the countries that have ordered network disruptions include Algeria, Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Congo (Brazzaville), Egypt, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ethiopia, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, Togo, and Zimbabwe. Others are Uganda, Mali, Morocco, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and South Sudan.<sup>29</sup>

Cameroon earned its disrepute for ordering one of the longest-running disruptions in Africa. The Cameroon government ordered a 93-day internet shutdown nationwide between January and April 2017. This was in response to a series of peaceful protests by teachers, students, and lawyers between October and November 2016 against unfavourable government policies, including the alleged marginalisation of Anglophone regions of the central African country. The internet had been instrumental in mobilising for the protests. At the time of ordering this shutdown, the communications ministry sent a mass SMS to mobile phone users across the country warning them of imprisonment for propagating false information on social media. Cameroon does not have a specific law on social media but uses Law No. 2010/012 on cybersecurity and cybercrime, under which one can be held criminally liable if they cannot attest to the veracity of information published online.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> CIPESA 2019, <https://cipesa.org/2019/09/overview-of-camerouns-digital-landscape/>

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Keating, Cameroon bans mobile Twitter service: <https://bit.ly/2ugyEis>

<sup>28</sup> MTN Cameroon asked to block Twitter: <https://bit.ly/3bLTmYi>

<sup>29</sup> CIPESA 2019: *Despots and Disruptions: Five Dimensions of Internet Shutdowns in Africa*: <https://bit.ly/2HCzcSE>

<sup>30</sup> Text of the law: <https://bit.ly/32eWd7S>

In the lead up to the disputed October 2018 election, the online environment in Cameroon featured incidences of propaganda, hate speech and incitement, further fuelling the Anglophone crisis that began in October 2016.<sup>31</sup> On September 30 2017 and during the days that followed, dominant social media and communication platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp were blocked in the Northwest and Southwest (Anglophone) regions of Cameroon.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the government met with Facebook representatives to seek assistance to tackle the spread of rumours, misinformation and 'fake news', it was also perpetrating the same online.<sup>33</sup> Without internet access, journalists could not publish online, nor could they conduct thorough investigations or talk securely with their sources.<sup>34</sup>

### 4.1.3 The Push Towards Determining Identity Amidst Poor Oversight

The government is reported to have taken measures to enhance its technical capacity to intercept and conduct surveillance to "checkmate the activities of unscrupulous people capable of threatening its internal security."<sup>35</sup> These measures have included, mandatory SIM card registration, and the adoption of digital identities and incorporated biometrics albeit with poor or no oversight. In 2018, Libom Li Likeng, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, confirmed government surveillance of user communications<sup>36</sup> after the internet was just restored stating that: "I will not reveal the methods here, but I will say that the government is organized because there is a whole agency which is equipped for that. In addition, the Cameroonian Police force has platforms of tracking and control as in all the countries."

#### SIM Card Registration

Since 2008, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MINPOSTEL) has made mandatory the registration of all mobile subscribers' SIM cards. After several years of confusion and resistance, the registration process has become effective on the different networks with all non-registered SIM cards deactivated by the end of 2012.<sup>37</sup>

In September 2015, Cameroon's Telecommunications Regulatory Board (ART) introduced a new decree,<sup>38</sup> signed by the Cameroonian Prime Minister, Philémon Yang, outlining the procedures related to the on-going identification of mobile subscribers exercise in the country.<sup>39</sup> Under the decree, the country's operators MTN, Orange, Viettel (Nexttel) and CamTel were required to update their subscriber databases, after which, any unregistered SIM cards would be deactivated. The new rules also limited a subscriber's SIM ownership to three SIM cards per operator. The details required included the full name of the subscriber; the identity card number, or any other official document; and the residential and business or registered physical address of the subscriber.<sup>40</sup> The new rules prohibit the sale of SIM cards by street dealers, meaning that mobile operators must set up authorized retail outlets or sign official partnership deals with retailers to sell SIM cards.

<sup>31</sup> *Internet Without Borders, Elections in Cameroon: Ideas to fight disinformation online and hate speech*, <http://bit.ly/2ID8TE4>

<sup>32</sup> *Cameroon blocks social media access in restive English-speaking regions* : <https://bit.ly/2SHHsay>

<sup>33</sup> *Daniel Finnan, Cameroon 'fake' election observers mask the truth about reality of presidential polls*, <http://bit.ly/2ICATrK>

<sup>34</sup> *CPI, UPR submission*: <https://bit.ly/25Fu1aY>

<sup>35</sup> *The stammerings of Cameroon's communications surveillance*: <https://bit.ly/2HyWSr6>

<sup>36</sup> *Deutsche Welle: Internet restored in Cameroon*: <https://bit.ly/37lyAFI>

<sup>37</sup> *What is happening in ICT in Cameroon*: <https://bit.ly/2vOC4te>

<sup>38</sup> *ART; Decree N ° 2015/3759 / PM of September 3, 2015 on subscribers' identification methods and terminal equipment of mobile networks.*

<sup>39</sup> *Cameroon: A Decree to limit numbers of SIM per subscriber and prohibit sale of SIM cards on streets;*

<https://www.businessincameroon.com/telecom/0110-5670-cameroon-a-decree-to-limit-numbers-of-sim-per-subscriber-and-prohibit-sale-of-sim-cards-on-streets>

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

In July 2019, the ART cracked down on mobile operators and fined them a combined CFA 3.5 billion (USD 5.9 million) for failing to comply with SIM registration rules. Orange Cameroon was also fined CFA 1.5 billion, while market leader MTN and Vietnamese-owned Viettel (Nexttel) were each fined CFA 1 billion. While the commonly held view is that SIM registration is useful to prevent cybercrimes, attention is often not paid to the potential of the use of the information for surveillance of key groups such as whistle-blowers, human rights defenders, the political opposition and the media.

### Rapid Adoption of Biometric Data Collection

Following the controversial 2011 elections, Cameroon's Electoral Commission adopted the use of biometric technology in February 2012 for the management of the elections. Biometric voter registration commenced in April 2013 and there is an update to the electoral roll every year.

Biometric technology was thought to be the most efficient tool for creating new electoral rolls. The biometric system set up for the management of elections in Cameroon comprised of 10 regional biometric centres located in elections management body (ELECAM's) regional delegations and one national election biometrics centre located at the body's head office in Yaoundé. After the signing of the contract with a German firm in April 2012, it took four months before the first biometric voter enrolment kits were delivered. The processing of voter registration data started in April 2013. The production of voter cards and polling station electoral rolls was launched after the data processing stage. These final stages of the biometric registration process, undertaken between July and August 2013, were preceded by the assignment of voters to polling stations.

#### 4.1.4 The Era of Social Media and Data Taxation

One of the notable and concerning phenomena in the more recent years is the use of taxation to undermine citizens' use of the internet. In some instances, such measures have been designed partly as a clear measure to limit how many citizens can access digital technologies and use them to hold governments to account. In other instances, governments have been eager to increase revenues from the telecom sector, and particularly, from over-the-top (OTT) services, which they claim are eating into the revenues of licensed telecom operators.

In December 2018, Cameroon announced a new Law No. 2018/022 on finance which introduced a new tax to be levied by telecommunications companies of 200 CFA (USD 0.35) for each software application downloaded from outside the country onto phones, tablets and computers etc.<sup>41</sup> This would add an additional cost to mobile apps, making access more expensive. The move caused anger on social media. This tax appears to treat downloaded applications as imports, and while it is yet to come into force, its implementation may be difficult.

<sup>41</sup> Article 8, *Portant Loi de Finances de la Republique du Cameroun pour l'Exercice 2019* : <https://bit.ly/32dPBXd>

## 4.2 Key Positive Developments

Despite the negative trends witnessed in the countries reviewed, there were notable developments that were positive and that support the enjoyment of internet freedom. The major development was included the robust advocacy and push-back by non-state actors.

### 4.2.1 Robust Advocacy and Push-back by Non-State Actors

---

In Cameroon, the coordinated responses by different activists through online advocacy, including through the hashtag #BringBackOurInternet, helped to bring international attention to the internet shutdown in the country.<sup>42</sup> The activists managed to rally the international community to the issue, building pressure that resulted in the restoration of internet connectivity in April 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Mediapart; *Restore the Internet or Bring back our internet in South West and North West Cameroon*: <https://bit.ly/2SWxKjl>

# 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

---

## 5.1 Conclusions

President Biya's initiative for a Digitised Cameroon 2035 seems a distant dream as of now as the average Cameroonian struggles to remain connected to the Internet. The major roadblocks to digitisation identified by this study are: Exorbitant data costs; Restrictions on free speech and posting online; Marginalisation of Anglophone regions which have emerged as a national hub of innovation and tech startups; Absence of definitive government policies regarding online media and Internet access; Frequent internet shutdowns notably in Anglophone regions.

The growth of internet usage in Cameroon can be distinctly mapped across two different time periods. During the time period of 2000-2010, internet penetration grew to a meagre 4% as a result of lethargic policy implementation and the absence of proper institutional frameworks. No major incidents of censorship were reported during this period. Internet usage expanded significantly from 2011-2019, a leap of almost 20%. Social media usage is expanding rapidly, driven in large part by mobile internet access and introduction of 3G and 4G services in 2015-2016.

The period from 2016-2018 saw maximum government interference through shutdowns and censorship. As a result, Cameroon has a very poor state of internet freedom, with the last four years representing a particularly worrying deterioration.



## 5.2 Recommendations

### Government

---

- Repeal laws that repress free expression and adopt international legal provisions that protect citizens' digital rights and freedoms.
- Undertake broad-based consultations with media, civil society and other relevant stakeholders in the formulation of laws and policies related to digital rights and freedom of expression.
- Improve transparency and responsiveness in the provision of information about violations under investigation.
- Refrain from shutting down the internet, as all previous instances have shown this affects civic participation, access to information and overrides basic digital rights.
- Implement a master plan for broadband infrastructure development.
- Popularise public access solutions, including subsidised internet access in schools and local centres, public Wi-Fi connection and community networks, to reach groups that cannot pay for regular Internet use.

### Internet Service Providers

---

- Uphold the rule of law by challenging unlawful information and network disruption requests from governments.
- Develop and adopt clear due diligence and transparency mechanisms to network disruptions orders and other unusual requests made by the governments.
- Prioritise telecommunications infrastructure provisions in underserved populations and geographic locations to help bridge national and regional inequities in digital resources and opportunities.

### Civil Society Organizations/NGOs

---

- Remain a watchdog over state activities regarding online rights and freedoms.
- Monitor and remind the government of their obligations under international treaties and agreements through advocacy and legal challenges.
- Educate communities on digital rights, and raise societal awareness on freedom of expression.
- Establish, develop and implement multi-stakeholder coalitions for more efficient push-back against government actions that undermine internet freedom.

## Media

---

- Monitor and publicly condemn violence perpetuated against individuals and organisations for exercising their right to free expression.
- Enhance media's capacity and understanding on the nature of digital rights violations and how best to report these in a balanced manner.
- Continue to monitor and investigate violations of online freedoms and rights.
- Develop and implement robust moderation mechanisms that maintain the fine balance between the monitoring of online abuse and harassment and the right to digital expression.
- Develop a culture of pushing back by producing factual content against misinformation and disinformation.

## Academia

---

- Take steps to become more informed and concerned about issues of digital rights and freedoms.
- Support advocacy efforts of civil society organizations and other stakeholders.
- Mobilise as communities to influence local and national policies and legislation that affect access to information and freedom of expression both online and offline.
- Actively participate in political life by demanding transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs



Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)

Plot 6 Semawata Place, Ntinda, P.O Box 4365 Kampala, Uganda.

Tel: +256 414 289 502 | Mobile: +256 790 860 084, +256 712 204 335

Email: [programmes@cipesa.org](mailto:programmes@cipesa.org)

Twitter: [@cipesaug](https://twitter.com/cipesaug)

Facebook: [facebook.com/cipesaug](https://facebook.com/cipesaug)

[www.cipesa.org](http://www.cipesa.org)