

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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CAMEROON

THE INTERNET AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL RESISTANCE AND PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS



PROTEGE QV

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Introduction

Cameroon is a central African country with a population estimated at just over 19 million in 2009.¹ According to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) figures, the country had 750,000 internet users as of June 2010; this means 3.9% of the population and a penetration rate of 4%.² Since 6 November 1982, Cameroon has been under the leadership of President Paul Biya.

After the troubled period of 1990-1992, during which the opposition staged huge civil unrest rallies to force the head of state out of power – called “Opérations Villes Mortes” (Operation Dead Cities or Ghost Towns) – the country enjoyed a decade of relative stability. However, this came to an end in February 2008, when riots over food prices (later called “hunger riots”) erupted in several cities, with infrastructures ransacked, cars and vehicles smashed, shops burnt down and many deaths reported.

Since the hunger riots, 23 February has been the day in the year when discontent Cameroonians take to the streets to demonstrate or to commemorate the February 2008 martyrs.

Echoing what happened in Tunisia and in Egypt, this year’s demonstrations were to be different, according to the hopes and aspirations of protest organisers. During the weeks before the February demonstrations, they announced that this year was the start of Cameroon’s “Egypt-style” revolt: “After Egypt, Cameroon next” was a message that spread throughout the internet and on flyers. There were calls for a popular peaceful revolution and for President Paul Biya to step down.

Cameroonian authorities reacted by suspending MTN mobile Twitter service³ for security reasons. In fact, the government had grown increasingly wary of the role Twitter and other social networks could play in sparking an Egypt- or Tunisia-style uprising.

Policy and political context

Since Cameroon achieved independence and asserted its sovereignty at the international level, its successive constitutions have proclaimed its people’s commitment to human rights as set out in the charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights.

It is therefore fitting that the current Constitution of 18 January 1996, amended in April 2008, grants constitutional status to all international legal instruments duly ratified by Cameroon, giving them precedence over domestic legislation.

At the national level, the preamble to the Constitution declares the Cameroonian people’s commitment to the following values and principles which are guaranteed to all citizens, without distinction based on sex or race, amongst others:

- The freedom of communication, expression and the press
- The freedom of assembly and of association.

Numerous institutions and laws deal with the freedom of expression and communication in our country. These include, to name just a few:

- The National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms created by Biya in February 1992. This governmental commission has conducted a number of investigations into human rights abuses and has been involved in training officials in matters of human rights.⁴
- Telecommunication Law No 98/014 of 14 July 1998, which regulates telecommunications, but does not deal with internet access.
- Law No 90/052 of 19 December 1999 on social communication.
- Law No 2010/012 of 21 December 2010 on cyber security and cyber crime.

These guarantees, while important, are deficient because there appear to be no provisions which limit how and when these freedoms can be restricted.

1 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cameroon

2 www.internetworldstats.com

3 MTN, a mobile telephony company, is the only service provider offering access to Twitter in Cameroon.

4 United States Department of State (1999) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1998*, Washington.

The suspension of MTN's Twitter service from 8 to 18 March 2011 came as a violation of both Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the freedom of communication guaranteed in national legislation. It also prompted fears of an attempt by the Cameroonian authorities to suppress the use of social networks, which had played a crucial role in the political unrest in the Arab world. Speaking on behalf of the government, Tchiroma Bakary, the minister of communication and government spokesman, told the Agence France Presse that it was the government's job to protect the nation.

How significant is the internet in social protest in Cameroon?

Some opposition political parties, associated with certain figures of civil society in the diaspora, launched a series of messages commemorating the February 2008 events using printed leaflets and a campaign blog called the Collective of Democratic and Patriotic Organisations of Cameroonians in the Diaspora (CODE).⁵ The Facebook page of writer Alain Patrice Nganang⁶ and SMS text messages were also used. An event was planned during what had become known as "martyrs' week". This started modestly on the due date, 23 February 2011. Protesters in Douala and in Yaoundé were quickly outnumbered by police. Cameroonian authorities were on a high alert over possible riots and flooded the two major cities with armed police and gendarmes controlling major access roads, central squares and government buildings. Vehicles entering the cities were stopped and checked. The troops monitored any unforeseen gathering of people that could form the nucleus of a protest, asking them to disperse.

Protesters found a difficult environment partly due to the massive police presence, and also because most of the calls for Cameroonians to stage an "Egypt-like" revolution indeed had come from the diaspora, with even independent media in Cameroon giving protests little attention and main opposition figures remaining silent. Many Cameroonians therefore felt the initiative was not from within the country and disconnected from local realities. Outside the cities of Douala and Yaoundé, there were no reports of protests.

Besides this massive deployment of troops on the streets, the government blocked MTN's Twitter service for almost ten days. This raised a fundamental question: Was the internet power

enough to threaten our government? As a communication medium unique in its kind, and unlike any other medium before, the internet allows individuals to express their ideas and opinions directly to a world audience and easily to each other. This power to give and receive information, so central to any conception of democracy, provides a vital connection between the internet and human rights and could be considered a threat to repressive regimes.⁷

Because of this, the blocking of MTN's Twitter service can be seen as a human rights violation by Cameroonian authorities. Reporters Without Borders condemned the lack of transparency surrounding the block and feared its implications for online freedom of expression in Cameroon. It said: "We hope the blocking of Twitter via SMS is not a prelude to other kinds of censorship of mobile phone services or tighter controls on the internet. Everything suggests that the authorities are trying to stop microblogging. We deplore the apparent readiness to impose censorship for the least reason, especially when the target is the peaceful expression of opinions."⁸

Yet social networks do not have many users in Cameroon. Facebook, for example, is used by only 1.5% of the population (176,666 Facebook users on 31 December 2010; a 4% penetration rate in the country according to ITU figures).⁹ Only around 50 people were affected by the suspension of MTN's Twitter service – so was it worth blocking it?

According to John Clarke,¹⁰ in order to make a case for disobeying the law as a significant element of social mobilisation, it is necessary to establish three things. First, you have to demonstrate that the society you propose to challenge is very seriously unequal and unjust. If the grievance does not rise to this standard, there is little basis for taking defiant action. Second, you have to show that the state structure and laws of this same society serve, in a fundamental fashion, to perpetuate the injustices you are opposing. Third, beyond demonstrating a deep degree of unfairness, you have to show that the historical record and the present situation would suggest that defying the rules of society offers the distinct possibility of success.

7 Centre for Democracy and Technology (2000) *The Internet and Human Rights: An Overview*. www.cdt.org/international/000105humanrights.shtml

8 www.ifex.org/cameroon/2011/03/25/twitter_blocked

9 www.internetworldstats.com

10 Clarke, J. (2003) *Social Resistance and the Disturbing of the Peace*. www.ohlj.ca/archive/articles/41_23_clarke.pdf

5 lecode.canalblog.com

6 www.cause.com/causes/387444

Were these issues combined in Cameroon's case? Yet Bakary attacked the protest organisers saying they wanted to "destroy the nation".

Conclusion

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media, and regardless of frontiers." Therefore, no matter what the means, government restrictions on speech or access to the speech of others violate basic freedom of expression protections.

Though we have to acknowledge that few things could be more threatening to some regimes than access to and use of a medium that knows no boundaries and is very hard to control, protecting freedom of expression on the internet is crucial because free expression is the foundation of democracy, essential to the individual's pursuit of happiness and a tool that provides protection for other fundamental human rights.

It may have been that the government's response to the protests was an anxiety about foreign influence in local affairs – including the influence of Cameroonians abroad. The internet is yet to be used as the most effective means for communicating human rights or to expose human rights violations. Online campaigns inside Cameroon were accompanied by print campaigns, as a matter of necessity. And activists used a website run by exiled Cameroonians to urge their fellow countrymen to learn from the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

Action steps

A number of steps should be taken to address the concerns described above:

- Policies that limit censorship of online communication should be formulated.
- Law No. 90/052 of 19 December 1999 on social communication should be amended to take into account the internet.
- The legislation setting up the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms should be reformed to conform to the UN principles relating to the status of national institutions to guarantee its independence.¹¹
- Citizens are not mere consumers of content, but also creators of content on the internet. Taken as an analogy, activists should not only use the internet to call for protest, but also to formulate ideas that can contribute constructively to the development of a country. ■

¹¹ UN General Assembly resolution 48/134 of December 1993, annex.

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