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CRACKING DOWN ON THE DIASPORA AND DISSENT

The internet penetration rate in Cameroon, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), is 3.8%. Quite unremarkable when compared to other African countries such as Morocco (41.3%), Tunisia (33.9%), Nigeria (28.3%), or South Africa (13.9%). Similarly, Cameroonian presence on leading social media platforms is minuscule. As of June this year, there were only 380 460 Facebook users in Cameroon, that is, slightly over 50% of the country's online population, but a mere 1.97% of the general population (compared to 2.5 million users and 17.5% of the population for Tunisia). Statistics on Cameroonian presence on Twitter are not available, however, anecdotal evidence indicates that there are far less Cameroonians on the microblogging platform.

Given the low internet penetration rate and the fact that Cameroonian cyber-activism is primarily a diaspora-driven endeavour, one would have expected that Cameroonian authorities would be largely indifferent to online dissent and critical speech on the internet. That has, however, not been the case as the Biya regime has been on a warpath against "cyber-terrorism" allegedly perpetrated by diaspora-based cyber-activists whom it accuses of "disinformation and intoxication".

The regime's hostility towards Cameroonian political activism culminated in the adoption of a controversial law on cybersecurity and cybercriminality in December 2010. The law tackles a variety of important issues such as the spread of paedophilia, child cyber pornography, and banking system intrusion, but also criminalises online speech or "the spread of false rumors", to quote its explanatory statement.

Specifically, the law sentences anyone who uses electronic communications to design, to publish or propagate a piece of information without being able to attest its veracity or prove that it was true to a term of six months to two years in jail and/or fined 5 to 10 million Francs CFA. These penalties shall be doubled if the offence is committed with the aim of disturbing "public peace".

In addition, the law holds liable internet service providers and "persons in charge, even gratuitously" for the content "of the storage of signals, written material, images, sound or messages of any nature supplied by the users of such services". In an obvious attempt to cow online activists in the diaspora, the law authorises the Government of Cameroon to leverage international judicial co-operation to prosecute individuals who threaten public order from abroad.

Attempts by the Biya regime to muzzle anti-regime activities on the internet have thus far not had the expected chilling effect. In the last year alone, the number of Facebook pages, blogs, websites and online forums seeking to mobilise Cameroonians around the idea of regime change has more than doubled. Even more disturbing from the point of view of the regime is the fact that Cameroonian cyber-activists have slowly begun to merge their online political activism with offline or grassroots mobilisation – a key lesson from the social media-driven revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. For example, in February this year, Cameroonian activists abroad used social media platforms to launch a series of anti-government campaigns which were supposed to culminate in nationwide protests on 25 February.

In a pre-emptive move, Issa Tchiroma, Cameroon's Minister of Communications and government spokesperson, took to the airwaves on 22 February to condemn Cameroonians in the diaspora whom he accused of trying to instigate Egypt-style protests: "They are quietly living abroad… send[ing] messages through the internet or Facebook, instigating people to demonstrate… government is aware of the intoxication... Cameroonian families will not allow their children to go to the streets to be massacred."

Although the February protests were mainly concentrated in the city of Douala, due to the massive deployment of troops across the country, the event highlighted the value of social media as a tool for building broad political coalitions, mobilising the public around political campaigns, and for providing an alternative information channel during news blackouts. The events in Douala were reported in real-time on Twitter from where it was picked up by the international media not usually interested in events in Cameroon.

It was therefore no surprise when barely three weeks later, on 8 March, MTN's Twitter via sms service, which allows subscribers to send and receive tweets on mobile phones, was suspended after the government ordered it to be shut down for reasons of "state security". Tchiroma tried to justify the ban by declaring that "it is the government's responsibility to protect the nation", while Biyiti bi Essam, Minister of Post and Telecommunications, argued that the problem was not with communications networks themselves, but with their subversive content. The service was eventually restored 10 days later after widespread international outcry but not before highlighting the Biya regime's increasingly clumsy attempts to muzzle online speech.

And the Biya regime has not relented in its efforts. On 31 March 31, parliament adopted two bills relating to Cameroon's intelligence services, one of which deals with threats stemming from the "rapid development of new technologies easily accessible to criminals and groups nurturing malevolent and aggressive projects against state security and the vital interests of the nation". Like the cyber security law which seems fairly innocuous first glance, this law contains provisions which give intelligence officers a free hand to penetrate, disrupt and hound Cameroonian "subversive" and "cyber-terrorists" cycles abroad, which are supposedly threatening the state.

The Biya regime's obsession with cracking down on Cameroonian online activists may seem excessive and misplaced to observers, however, there is a reason for it. The regime is aware that donor agencies, Western governments, foreign investors and even tourists increasingly rely on online reports when making key decisions about Cameroon. The growth of websites and blogs that are critical of the regime, and of social media platforms that are used to attack the regime is therefore a major cause for concern. In fact, some within the government argue that diaspora online activism has the potential to become an existential threat. The regime is also aware that while the majority of Cameroonians don't have access to the internet, the few who do regularly download and print "subversive" reports which are then widely distributed across the country and even published in local newspapers.

As a result, the Biya regime does not view Cameroonian cyberspace as a viable space for civic engagement and public discourse, instead, it sees it as a threat to the regime – a space that must be either be controlled, co-opted, contained, or simply coerced into submission, even if it is a largely diaspora-driven phenomenon.

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