



## **Blocking of internet access in Cameroon deprives civil society of essential resources**

*Cameroon saw the state impose a range of restrictions on civil society's fundamental rights in 2017, not least a four-month internet shutdown in the country's Anglophone regions in response to protests against the marginalisation of those regions. CIVICUS speaks to Maximilienne Ngo Mbe, Director of Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC). Established in 2007, REDHAC is a network of activists and civil society organisations in Central Africa, with members in eight countries of the region. It focuses primarily on the protection of fundamental human rights.*



### **1. How would you describe the current state of democracy in Cameroon? Has the practice of democracy in the country changed over the past few years?**

Democracy is currently in decline in Cameroon despite the fact that the government has successively put in place several structures to ensure democratic practice, including the National Elections Observatory (ONEL), an independent institution in charge of controlling and monitoring the electoral process. ONEL was created in December 2000 and was later replaced by ONEL1 and eventually by ELECAM (Elections Cameroon) in 2006. However, all ELECAM members are high officials of the *Cameroon People's Democratic Movement* (RDPC), the incumbent political party. They are appointed by presidential decree and funded by the government. As a result, ELECAM's impartiality is not guaranteed.

A decade ago it was observed that democratic practices were taking root, with the understanding that this was an ongoing process. But the experience has been short-lived, as in 2013 the president declared war on the terrorist sect Boko Haram that is spreading terror in the Far North region of Cameroon. As a result, democracy has taken a hard blow, in the form of an electoral law that does not promote transparency and alternation in power, is not neutral and limits participation through the imposition of exorbitant costs, in a context where the minimum salary is barely 25,000 CFA (US\$ 45). Additionally, restrictive laws have been imposed on fundamental freedoms, and laws that are passed are not being enforced. A state of un-rule of law has been established.

The state of Cameroon remains repressive. Every day we witness the violation of fundamental freedoms, and in particular of the freedoms of expression and association. The dominance of the executive power over the legislative and judicial branches remains constant. The practice of democracy has not really changed in recent years, because we have had the same president for 35 years. In addition to this, there is a complete absence of a real opposition party, because the government represses any expression or demonstration by a party other than the ruling party.

## **2. Is civil society currently able to contribute to democratic governance in Cameroon?**

The answer is simultaneously yes and no. Yes, because civil society remains the least corrupt and the most neutral of all sectors, including elites and traditional, religious and administrative forces; and no, because civil society is weakly structured, amateurish and lacking in funding.

## **3. How have recent restrictions on the freedom of expression, such as the internet shutdown, affected civil society?**

Restrictions on the freedom of expression have become the rule in Cameroon. Tactics include censorship, threats, arbitrary arrests and detentions, intimidation, burglaries of CSO premises, media closures, high taxes on private television outlets, and house arrest. Since November 2016, when the [crisis](#) began in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, additional restrictions have been imposed: the shutdown of the internet connection for three months from January to April 2017 and disruptions and interruptions of outgoing communications for civil society organisations in the two regions where protesting activists had been arrested. As a result, civil society has been deprived of access to information, of the means to disseminate and share information and to organise effectively, and of the ability to receive reports allowing them to pursue their activities. This has in turn led to a slowdown in the execution of their activities and delays in fulfilling their obligations with donors. In addition, civil society was affected by discontinuities in financial support from partners as a result of their delay in submitting reports.

## **4. How has civil society reacted to this?**

Civil society took the government's decision to shut down the internet in the Northwest and Southwest regions very badly. So it mobilised all its forces and energies to urge the government to restore the internet connection. Several civil society organisations around the world, including Cameroonian civil society such as REDHAC, put out multiple press releases condemning the government's decision. The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Central Africa and Head of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), François Louncény Fall, described the government's decision as having created a "deplorable situation." As a result of enormous efforts and several battles fought by civil society organisations, the internet connection was re-established three months later.

## **5. What support or solidarity can international civil society offer you in these times?**

We need several forms of support. Firstly, we need medium and long-term financial support with some flexibility regarding the submission of projects and reports, as well as permanent emergency funds that can reduce the vulnerabilities of at-risk defenders. Secondly, we need technical support, in the form of, for example, the supply of sophisticated security equipment, such as surveillance cameras, alarm systems, digital fingerprints, cameras to authenticate photo and video when monitoring and reporting, and other secure IT tools. Finally, there is also a need for continuous training to build civil society capacity in the areas of digital security, physical security and the management of computerised data; training on the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law, and involvement in the electoral process and good governance issues; training on monitoring and reporting of human rights violations at all times, and particularly in contexts of conflict or terrorism; and training in advocacy in national, regional and international forums.

- Civic space in Cameroon is rated as 'repressed' by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), indicating serious restrictions in the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.
- Get in touch with REDHAC through their [website](#) or their [Facebook](#) page.