



GAAMAC

GLOBAL ACTION AGAINST  
MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

Platform for Prevention

# INTENSIFIED BITTERNESS

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COMPOSITE REPORT ON THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION,  
FAKE NEWS, HATE SPEECH AND ELECTION VIOLENCE IN CAMEROON

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# ABOUT GAAMAC

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## ABOUT THE GLOBAL ACTION AGAINST MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

The Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC) is a global inclusive network of states, civil society and academic institutions that aim to support states in establishing national architectures and policies for the early and permanent prevention of atrocities. As a platform, GAAMAC convenes its diverse community in-person and online to openly share good practices, expertise and experiences without pointing fingers and to look instead for concrete and feasible solutions. Since 2013, it organizes global meetings every two years.

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

## THE AFRICA WORKING GROUP

The GAAMAC Africa Working Group (G-AWG) is one of the regional initiatives originally created during the GAAMAC II global meeting held in Manila, the Philippines, from 2-4 February 2016. The G-AWG is made up of a cross-section of practitioners, academics and policy makers working on mass atrocity prevention in the African continent.

[www.gaamac.org/africa-working-group](http://www.gaamac.org/africa-working-group)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Fake news, hate speech and misinformation are all at the forefront of severe violence before, during and after the election periods in Cameroon.
- Fake news, hate speech and misinformation-related violence comes with consequences. Intensified violence to disrupt elections in the country have been characterized by abduction and sometimes killing of political and non-political figures.
- Legal sanctions are not enough. Sanctions provided in some of the legal instruments in Cameroon do not act as enough deterrents to electoral violence.
- Consultative meetings and engagement work. Where there have been consultative meetings and engagement, different stakeholders have been able to develop collaborative and self-regulatory mechanisms for monitoring and combating hate speech.
- Media practitioners need self-awareness. The media practitioners need to be trained and also acknowledge the important role they have to play in mitigating the propagation of messages that incite hatred.
- Instruments for dialogue are crucial. Governments should endeavour to set up regional task forces against fake news, hate speech and misinformation as an instrument for dialogue between various stakeholders and between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon.
- Certain critical stakeholders in Cameroon's electoral process, such as the judiciary, law enforcement authorities and journalists, should be provided with comprehensive and regular training on fake news and hate speech prevention and punishment strategies.

## **Introduction**

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Democracies are anchored on regular elections, providing citizens with an opportunity to express their leadership preference. Often, these elections lead to a transfer of power and, unfortunately, we have seen how in many African nations election results can trigger violence and lead to atrocities; Cameroon is no exception to this occurrence. This paper will evaluate atrocities as by-products of misinformation, fake news and other related hate speeches. Further, we will evaluate the subtle effects on, firstly, women, girls and children as a subgroup; and, secondly, on journalists and other broader groups in civil society, particularly religious groups and leaders; and, lastly, on various security and electoral personnel.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

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**Fake news** and purposeful misinformation are generally defined as "... circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals". Similarly, many contend that this practice is propelled by the fact that we live in a "post-truth" society.<sup>1</sup> The increased use of social media to share news ensured that fact-checking capabilities decreased, triggering an increased use of the term across the globe.

Three examples stand out – the first being in South Africa with a UK-based public relations firm, Bell Pottinger, coining the controversial phrase of "White Monopoly Capital" in the lead-up to the elective conference of South Africa's ruling party in 2017. The second example would be the notable use of fake news ahead of Brexit in the UK, and the most recent related to the just concluded presidential elections of the United States of America, which has suffered its own fair share of the "fake news saga".

**Hate speech** does not have a legal definition in international instruments. However, some concessions have been made to define hate speech as any communication in speech, writing or behaviour that seeks to attack or use any pejorative or discriminatory language about a person or group based on who they are; this is often based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or any other identity factor.

**Elections** are defined as an organized and formal process by which voters cast their vote for a person for political office. Elections are a cyclical process that cover the period before, during and after the election itself.<sup>2</sup> It is vital to identify elections in this way since electoral violence may be triggered at any time within these periods, and so, in order to prevent such violence, the full electoral cycle must be accounted for.<sup>3</sup> Cameroon's president for over 38 years, Paul Biya, abolished presidential time limits in 2008. Fighting and violence surged in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon after Biya indicated his intention to run for a seventh term in office. Accordingly, the lead-up to the October 2018 election saw a spike in online hate speech, whilst news reports fuelled the existing polarization of the Cameroonian people.

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<sup>1</sup> Watkins, T. Contending for the Truth Amidst the Fake News Pandemic, <https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2017-07/contending-truth-amidst-fake-news-epidemic>

<sup>2</sup> (IFES, 2014, p. 12)

<sup>3</sup> (ibid., p. 2)

**Atrocity crimes** are defined as the “most serious crimes against humankind”, including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing.<sup>4</sup> According to the UN Framework for the Analysis of Atrocity Crimes, atrocity crimes “are not spontaneous or isolated events; they are processes, with histories, precursors and triggering factors which, combined, enable their commission”.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, because “atrocity crimes are processes”,<sup>6</sup> elections can act as triggers that “transform general risk into an increased likelihood that atrocities crimes will be committed”.<sup>7</sup>

## The Case of Cameroon

Earlier in 2020, the spokesperson of the Cameroonian government and its Minister of Communications, René Emmanuel Sadi, publicly expressed deep concerns over what he said is “a growing trend of citizens spreading falsehood using social media platforms to tarnish the image of public officials or sabotage government action”. The government, through Sadi, further warned that those who continue to propagate “fake news” on social media platforms risk facing the heavy arm of the law. This, however, has been used to clamp down on anti-government opinions.

In 2018, a group of Francophone Cameroonian journalists went on television broadcasts and called Anglophones “rats” and “terrorists” and requested the overwhelmingly Francophone Cameroonian government to kill them (United Nations: 2019). This hate speech further added fuel to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. President Biya and his government issued uncouth and disparaging statements siding with the Francophones, naming Anglophone separatists and activists as “terrorists” and vowing to “deal” with them. Consequently, the journalism profession in Cameroon has taken a massive blow, and some have touted it as the main protagonist of fake news (Hilton: 2019). The increase in dissemination of fake news by the media in Cameroon has led to vast polarization as there have been direct links between the spread of fake news through the media and actual violence in the streets of Cameroon (Hilton: 2019).

The direct consequence of the decaying journalism profession in Cameroon, marked with bias and partiality, has depleted trust in many Cameroonian media houses and practitioners and this has led to many people relying on other sources for news, including, but are not limited to, social media. Within Cameroonian journalism, the term *gombo* is a popular metaphor for various payments, freebies and rewards solicited by journalists and provided by different news actors to journalists. The ultimate aim of giving *gombo* is to influence what and who is covered, and how they are covered. The categories of *gombo*, the contexts in which it is solicited and the hierarchies it has evolved, point to a culture of patronage that is constantly being defined, shaped and reshaped by both journalists and patrons (Ndangam, L. 2009).<sup>8</sup> The challenge with social media and citizen journalism is that they often deviate from journalistic ethics and standards, thereby making it even easier to peddle fake news. For example, as of September 2020, there is currently only one Facebook third-party fact-checking network in Cameroon compared with 10 in the USA and three in Kenya, DRC and Nigeria.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> (United Nations, 2014, p. 1)

<sup>5</sup> (ibid., p. iii)

<sup>6</sup> (ibid., p. 4)

<sup>7</sup> (ibid., p. 5–6)

<sup>8</sup> Ndangam, L. 2009. All of Us Have Taken Gombo. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 10(6): 819–842. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884909344478>

<sup>9</sup> (Broadband Commission, 2020, p. 73)

The effects of social media engagement and its role in news dissemination intensified so much ahead of the 2018 Cameroonian election that nine of the candidates relied on social media to engage with their various constituencies, according to Africanews.<sup>10</sup> President Biya's main opposition and challenger in the 2018 election, Joshua Osih, ran an entire campaign on social media. Many criticized his unorthodox approach and called it "unpresidential"; he retorted that was his intention to break protocol and demystify the idea of what it is to be president, by being accessible to his constituency and those he sought to lead (Africanews: 2018). Ordinarily, much of the campaigning news and engagement is done through the media or roadshows, but this approach was indicative of the deviation from traditional media to social media, unregulated as it may be.

In an attempt to regulate the use of social media, the Cameroonian government in 2018 met with Facebook officials to ask for help to curb the spread of "fake news" on social media. The engagement between Facebook officials and the Cameroonian government was challenging since Facebook does not associate itself with censorship. This came after the Cameroonian government raised verification issues regarding graphic videos of Cameroonian soldiers killing unarmed civilians in the separatist regions. Those videos, while played down by government sources, have been verified to be real by organizations including Amnesty International (Quartz Africa: 2018).<sup>11</sup> The Cameroonian government sought to mask these violations under the guise of fake news and even blocked Facebook and WhatsApp in the Anglophone regions during an internet shutdown. The weaponization of fake news by the government has called into question the balance between curbing the spread of fake news and curtailing freedom of speech.

The rationale to curb fake news to protect national security and harmony is necessary; however, where a line is drawn to ensure that states exercise this duty, it must be done without curtailment of freedom of expression.

## **Methodological Approach**

A focus group discussion targeting youths, journalists and civil society leaders and individual interviews with politicians and religious leaders was held. The rationale behind this clustering of the first targets was that they are the main audience/actors/generators of fake news, misinformation and hate speech. With regards to politicians, it is important to speak to them one at a time as it allowed us to hear each of their views without intrusion. The focus group discussions with young people, journalists and civil society leaders was done physically while for politicians and religious leaders, the interviews were conducted virtually by phone and both interviews followed a semi-structure questionnaire.

To this effect, particular questions focused on understanding the fake news, misinformation, hate speech and election atrocity crimes in the context of Cameroon, and how they affect different persons based on factors, such as social life, culture and education, among others, introduced during the focus group discussion. This was to get the different individual views of the targeted population, and the findings and recommendations were derived from such discussions.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2018/09/22/cameroon-s-first-social-media-election/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/1390219/cameroon-asks-facebook-to-help-beat-fake-news-as-election-looms/>

## Nature and Dynamics of Election-Related Misinformation, Fake News and Hate Speech and Its Connection with Atrocity Crimes

In 2017, English-speaking separatists in Cameroon were calling for the establishment of a new nation autonomous from the mostly French-speaking government. A situation that was born out of misinformation and propaganda ushered a new wave of electoral violence because organization of elections by the government is seen by separatists as provocation and a denial of their autonomy. So, they either ask citizens to boycott elections under threat of violence or launch an attack on elections day. Also, there have been records of post-elections kidnappings and other forms of violence following the 2018 presidential elections. To buttress this assertion, an interview was conducted amongst some members of the political parties that participated in the 2018 presidential elections. In so doing, we noticed that some politicians from the Social Democratic Front (SDF) opposition political party who participated in the case study asserted that they were not able to vote during the 2018 presidential elections as a result of insecurity in the Northwest region of Cameroon where their polling stations were located. They cited threats from armed separatist groups especially through social media. They also believe that the threats meant other party militants were not able to exercise their right to franchise in choosing their leader.<sup>12</sup>

Also, the 2018 presidential elections were marked with violence owing to misinformation by one of the candidates who declared himself winner before the results were proclaimed by the competent authority, the Constitutional Council. This resulted in post-electoral violence in 2019. In an interview with some members of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) opposition political party, who were claiming to have won the 2018 presidential election, they revealed that they (party militants) have been victims of electoral violence during peaceful protests and rallies in 2019. When asked of the nature of the election violence, they reported that it took the form of protesting party militants being shot with live ammunitions, citing barrister Michele Ndoki, a CRM lawyer and party member, as an example. They also posited that other party militants were brutalized and arrested, citing the case of the party's national president, Professor Maurice Kamto, and other top party officials arrested in 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, our case study revealed that all members of the four political parties whom we interviewed conceded to the assertion that the ongoing "Anglophone Crises", which has resulted in violence before, during and after election periods in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, has been triggered by fake news, hate speech and misinformation.<sup>14</sup> When asked to give instances of such fake news, hate speech or misinformation, the Governor of the Southwest region, Bernard Okalia Bilai, was cited to have called Anglophones "*chiens* or dogs" in 2017 when addressing Anglophone protest organizers, language considered to be "provocative" according to a SDF politician. Ernest Obama, a journalist, was also cited as using hate speech in 2017 when referring to Anglophones during one of his TV shows on Vision 4 (a private media channel), calling on state authorities to take "extremely repressive measures" on anyone in the English-speaking regions considered as a "terrorist". The Minister of Territorial Administration, Atanga Nji Paul, was not left out as he was cited to

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with members of four different political parties (CPDM, CRM, SDF and PAP) which participated in the 2018 Presidential elections in Cameroon, conducted on 14 November 2020.

<sup>13</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>14</sup> (Ibid)

have been “misinformed” when he denied the existence of an “Anglophone problem” in one of his media outings at the CRTV (the national TV channel of Cameroon). When asked of the consequences of such actions, it was revealed by the participants that these comments contributed to fuelling the ongoing Anglophone crises<sup>15</sup> through which separatist fighters in these regions (the Northwest and Southwest regions) have used every violent strategy within their means to disrupt any elections organized by the government. The resulting effects have been the abduction and sometimes killing of political figures (such as councillors from the SDF political party)<sup>16</sup> by separatist fighters. Thus, hate language such as “dogs” and “terrorists” used by state and non-state personnel respectively on English-speaking Cameroonians will only fuel electoral violence in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon.

## **Preventive Strategies and Areas of Elections Capacity Building, Suitable for Addressing Atrocity Crime Triggers of the At-Risk Population**

Cameroon has a litany of laws aimed at curbing the spread of fake news, misinformation and electoral violence, notably Law No. 2010/012 on cybersecurity and cybercrime under which a person can be held criminally liable if they cannot attest to the veracity of information published online. Additionally, as per the Cameroonian Penal Code, specifically in Section 113,<sup>17</sup> a person can be jailed for up to three years and fined up to CFAF 2,000,000 (about USD 3,500) for sharing or propagating false or unverifiable information that is likely to injure a public authority or tamper with national unity. Despite the above laws, Cameroon has experienced its fair share of misinformation and fake news that is believed to have triggered electoral violence and other atrocity crimes. Addressing electoral violence, the Cameroon Penal Code stipulates in Section 123 that whoever on polling day is found guilty of insult or violence against the local polling commission or any of its members, or through assault or threats delays or obstructs election operations, shall be punished with imprisonment of up to two years or with a fine of up to CFAF 100,000 (about USD 187), or with both. However, it seems that sanctions provided in legal instruments do not act as enough of a deterrent to electoral violence in Cameroon.

Hate speech includes any “speech that incites or advocates hatred against an individual or group” and “has been used throughout history to mobilise people towards violence for political ends”.<sup>18</sup> The UN had been engaged with Cameroonian authorities ahead of the February 2019 legislative and municipal elections in a year-long consultative process to strategize ways of abating hate speech. These consultative meetings arguably helped to develop collaborative and self-regulatory mechanisms for monitoring and combating hate speech in Cameroon. In February 2019, following a seminar hosted by the UN Human Right’s regional office, 81 journalists from media outlets in several regions in Cameroon agreed to develop a code of conduct on crisis reporting. They acknowledged the role they had to play as media professionals in opposing the propagation of messages that incite hatred. They also agreed to launch that same month a campaign to change the discriminatory narrative and

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<sup>15</sup> (Ibid).

<sup>16</sup> (Human Rights Watch, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> iAfrikan, Cameroon’s Government Decries the Abusive Use of Social Media. <https://www.iafrikan.com/2020/07/14/camerouns-government-decries-abuse-of-social-media/>

<sup>18</sup> (Freedom House, 2014, p. 2)

counter hate speech. To this end, it is vital to strengthen the capacity of the media partners on countering hate speech and fake news, using the media to promote intercultural learning and an understanding of differences and discrimination. Young people ought to be provided with the resources (education and non-educational) to lead campaigns against hate speech and misinformation. Religious leaders are crucial to promoting a just and peaceful society, their role as spiritual leaders, capable of preaching love above all differences, needs to be strengthened. On the communal and nationwide scale, government and local community leaders have to organize permanent consultative forums to strengthen capacity and devise strategies to work together to counter hate speech and fight misinformation.

Another mechanism that resulted from the regional office's consultations was a 20-person task force that Louis-Marie Bouaka, head of the regional office, pointed out could become an instrument for dialogue between various stakeholders. "The task force should also be able to strategically develop a common vision for a dynamic awakening within Cameroonian society that will gradually make it possible to uproot the viruses of hate and violence, and bring about a culture of human rights, democracy, with communities living together in peace," he added.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As elections are an ongoing process in the democratic life of any country, people, government and media organizations must have access to timely and credible information to avoid viral situations. However, with the advent of social media and citizen journalism, credible information is hard to find and, as governments enact policies to fight fake news and hate speech, an important question arises: When is the line drawn between the right to freedom of expression, fake news and hate speech in Cameroon?

Based on our study, it is clear that fake news, hate speech and misinformation serve as good triggers of electoral violence in Cameroon. Therefore, in devising strategies around curbing this violence, we need a multifaceted response that addresses all these matters. While there may be legitimate claims and grievances during elections, it is vital to tackle fake news and the spread of hate speech whilst also retaining enough freedom of speech to hold the government to account. This is especially important during the election cycle since it is often "the election *event* itself that intensifies bitterness over these festering issues, funnelling charged emotions into channels that encourage violence".<sup>20</sup> Although Cameroon in 2020-2021 ranked 35<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of likelihood of a new mass killing,<sup>21</sup> it is still vital to act to minimize chances of such an event in the country.

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<sup>19</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Cameroon Crisis: Preventing the Speech That Incites Violence. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/CameroonCrisis.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> (IFES, 2014, p. 93)

<sup>21</sup> <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/countries/cameroon>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- The continued training for journalists, bloggers and social media influencers on fact-checking and countering hate speech.
- The apolitical nature of certain institutions such as media houses and civil society organizations must be maintained.
- Strict implementing of countering hate speech legislature should be ensured by national agencies such as the National Communication Council and National Agency for Information and Communication.
- A national agency should be set up to trace, track and punish publishers of fake news and promoters of hate speech online.
- Civil society organizations and media organs should take the lead in raising awareness of digital rights and responsibilities in all communities.
- Media organs should dedicate space on home pages and other high-traffic areas to promote sources of official information on the electoral process from official sources.
- The judiciary, law enforcement authorities and public bodies should be provided with comprehensive and regular training on fake news and hate speech prevention strategies.
- There is need for political education in and out of educational establishments.
- There is need for an electoral system guarantees the participation of all race, sex, tribes and cultures without bias and one that is free and fair.
- There is need to reinforce legislation relating to fake news and misinformation.
- Religious institutions can form a coalition for the purpose of monitoring pre- and post-election processes. Also, they should get candidates to commit to peace before the elections. In all, we cannot undermine the essence of promoting love, truth and justice if we envisage a society where the respect for human rights and democracy prevails before, during and after electoral periods.
- Religious institutions should educate their respective congregation on peaceful opposition to unfair election results.
- Since ecumenical service is typical in Cameroon, it can be exploited, and religious institutions can use this avenue to preach peace.

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