POLICY BRIEF

MAPPING ELECTIONS–RELATED ATROCITY CRIME TRIGGERS IN CAMEROON

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Edited by Adewale Olusola Adeboye, PhD
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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

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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADF</td>
<td>Ambazonia Defence Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>Ambazonia Self-Defence Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPDM</td>
<td>Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPJ</td>
<td>Committee to Protect Journalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPNR</td>
<td>Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRM</td>
<td>Cameroon Renaissance Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELECAM</td>
<td>Elections Cameroon</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAC</td>
<td>Cameroon Armed Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFES</td>
<td>International Foundation for Electoral Systems</td>
</tr>
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<td>NUDP</td>
<td>National Union for Democracy and Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCHA</td>
<td>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDF</td>
<td>Social Democratic Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOCADEF</td>
<td>Southern Cameroons Defence Forces</td>
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</table>
This study analyses the causes and triggering factors of electoral violence in Cameroon. Its root cause is the conflict between Anglophone separatists and the Francophone majority.

This cause can be divided into specific categories:
- political causes such as interparty and intraparty competition;
- societal causes in the form of traditional rivalries between different regional, gender and ethnic groups;
- local causes, notably community contests over access to certain resources;
- patronage and the resulting conflicts over access to government positions;
- technical causes such as insufficient monitoring and administration leading up to elections; and
- structural causes leading to restricted or denied accessibility of voters, candidates and observers.

Fake news and misinformation sow distrust in the electoral process and stoke chronic resentments over ethnicity, education, land ownership and access to resources.

Fake news can act as a direct trigger for atrocity crimes in the presence of the following risk factors:
- situations of armed conflict or other forms of instability;
- serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law;
- weakness of state structures;
- conflicting motives such as the distribution of resources, strategic territorial interests or ethnic tensions;
- capacity to commit atrocity crimes by recruiting/mobilizing large numbers of supporters;
- absence of mitigating factors, notably an independent national media landscape;
- enabling circumstances such as the strict control of the use of communication channels; and
- triggering events such as elections, national holidays, etc.

The likelihood of fake news resulting in atrocity crimes is strongest when the misinformation is used to mobilize civilian support through the exacerbation of existing cultural differences, therefore amounting to hate speech.
Background

Following the independence of French Cameroon in 1960 the UN mandated the unification of the Anglophone and Francophone regions. However, the UN gave the Anglophone regions no option for independence, sowing the seeds for future separatism.

Under the new federal system, Anglophones were promised a degree of autonomy. However, the Francophone government abolished federalism in 1972 and instituted policies in a unitary state that economically and politically marginalized Anglophones. Specific tensions arose over the perceived forcible assimilation into the Francophone legal and education systems.

These tensions erupted in October 2017 when armed Anglophone separatists declared independence and announced the new state of “Ambazonia” in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. While the Anglophone minority constitutes just 20 percent of the population of Cameroon, they are a majority in these regions.

As of 27 March 2020, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimates that “at least 679,000 people have been internally displaced in the north-west and south-west regions, while 59,000 have fled to neighboring Nigeria.” “Around 1.9 million people, about half of whom are children, are estimated to be in need, an increase of 80 per cent compared to 2018, and an almost 15-fold increase since 2017.” (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2019))

The contextual background to this conflict acts as the root causes of violence, to which misinformation, fake news and hate speech act as triggers for electoral conflicts. Herein lies the distinction between causes and triggers.

“The causes of violence are many and complex and can be traced back to years of real and perceived injustices including land issues, ethnic tensions and extreme poverty.”

“The triggers are the more immediate and more identifiable stimuli that provoked the eruptions that immediately follow the announcement of election results.”

Therefore, fake news and misinformation act to sow distrust in the electoral process and stoke chronic resentments over ethnicity, education, land ownership and access to resources. “Often, it is the election event itself that intensifies bitterness over these festering issues, funnelling charged emotions into channels that encourage violence.”

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1 (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020)
2 (USHMM, 2020)
3 (ibid.)
4 (Washington Post, 2018)
5 (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020)
6 (ibid.)
7 (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020)
8 (IFES, 2014, p. 47)
9 (ibid.)
10 (ibid., p. 93)
Key Terms

Fake News and Misinformation: Nounkeu distinguishes between misinformation and disinformation stating that misinformation involves the unintentional sharing of false information. Conversely, disinformation involves the systematic and strategic sharing of false information, alluding to an overarching plan of propagating fake news. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research, intent is irrelevant, except for elucidating the actors instigating the spread of fake news. Instead, both misinformation and disinformation have the same outcome of spreading fake news with potentially harmful consequences, especially in the context of elections where fake news undeniably threatens democratic processes.

Hate Speech: Includes any “speech that incites or advocates hatred against an individual or group – has been used throughout history to mobilize people towards violence for political ends”. Hate speech is inherently fake news and misinformation since it alludes to racial or ethnic hierarchies that become mobilized to justify violence. Freedom House has explored the relationship between hate speech and violence, concluding that “Hate speech by itself cannot cause violence. Other contextual factors are always in play”. This suggests that fake news must act as a trigger that “fans the flames” of existing tensions and is especially potent during an election due to the nature of an election’s role in the transfer of power.

Elections: Elections are the cyclical process that cover the period before, during and after the election itself. It is important 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, it is vital that the full electoral cycle is accounted for. Importantly, in relation to the effect of fake news, since elections are a cyclical process that build citizens’ trust in institutions, fake news and misinformation within this process can have a particularly damaging effect in reducing the electorate’s trust in the democratic process, potentially triggering electoral violence.

Electoral Violence: Electoral violence constitutes “any random or organized act or threat to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay or to otherwise influence an electoral process”. According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), there are a number of causes of electoral violence (Table 1). There are eight types of electoral violence according to the IFES, of which five have been identified as present in Cameroon (Table 2).

11 (Nounkeu, 2020, p. 7)
12 (ibid.)
13 (Broadband Commission, 2020, p. 7)
14 (ibid., p. 123)
15 (Freedom House, 2014, p. 2)
16 (Freedom House, 2014, p. 3)
17 (IFES, 2014, p. 12)
18 (ibid., p. 2)
19 (ibid.)
20 (ibid., p. 31)
21 (ibid., p. 164)
**Atrocity Crimes**: These cover the “most serious crimes against humankind” including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing.\(^{22}\) 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”.\(^{23}\) Therefore, because “atrocity crimes are processes”,\(^{24}\) elections can act as triggers that “transform general risk into an increased likelihood that atrocities crimes will be committed”.\(^{25}\) For example, elections can trigger violence against specific sections of the population based on their membership of a particular ethnic or religious group, thereby constituting genocide when conducted on a larger scale.\(^{26}\) Moreover, a key requisite for identifying crimes against humanity is the presence of violence against civilians.\(^{27}\) (Table 3)
**TABLE 1 – CAUSES OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN CAMEROON**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of Electoral Violence</th>
<th>Definition&lt;sup&gt;28&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Examples in Cameroon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political</strong></td>
<td>Interparty and intraparty competition between national, state and/or local candidates and/or rivals.</td>
<td>Competition between ruling party (CPDM) and opposition groups (SDF, CRM, NUDP, CPNR). Competition between government forces (FAC) and separatist forces (ADF, SOCADEF, ASC) and Boko Haram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td>Traditional rivalries among different regional, gender and tribal/ethnic groups and local chiefs and leaders.</td>
<td>Rivalry between Francophone and Anglophone population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local</strong></td>
<td>Community contests over access to natural and agricultural resources (water, livestock, grazing lands, fishing rights, planting fields, minerals, oil, etc.).</td>
<td>Centralized system meant that Francophone investments were being prioritized and Anglophone regions being underfunded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>** Patronage**</td>
<td>Conflicts over access to government positions in national and state executive and legislative offices (presidency, governorships, ministries and legislatures, etc.) and various security forces (military, police, prisons, wildlife wardens, etc.).</td>
<td>President Paul Biya has been in power since 1982. CPDM was the only legal political party until December 1990. February 2020 elections – CPDM has 77 percent of seats in Parliament. As of March 2017, only one of the 36 government ministers who control departmental budgets is an Anglophone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical</strong></td>
<td>Inadequate administrative and operational capacity of electoral bodies to manage, finance, administer and monitor electoral events and resolve technical deficiencies and disputes before, during and after activities.</td>
<td>ELECAM was created in 2006 to oversee elections but “President Biya chooses its members, and CPDM partisans have historically dominated the body.”&lt;sup&gt;29&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structural</strong></td>
<td>Restricted or denied accessibility of voters, candidates, observers and/or media to electoral activities and events during voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigning, polling, results tabulation and dispute resolution.</td>
<td>Separatists called for boycott of February 2020 elections, threatening those who wanted to take part and warning people to stay at home.&lt;sup&gt;30&lt;/sup&gt; Out of 2,300 polling stations in the Northwest region, only 74 opened on election day. Approximately 15 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the Southwest region, while turnout was only 5 percent in the Northwest region.&lt;sup&gt;31&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>28</sup> (IFES, 2014, p. 164)  
<sup>29</sup> (Freedom House, 2019)  
<sup>30</sup> (Human Rights Watch, 2020)  
<sup>31</sup> (ibid.)
### TABLE 2 – TYPES OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN CAMEROON

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Electoral Violence</th>
<th>Examples in Cameroon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party-on-Party:</strong> “any action or threat of violence exerted by an organized political group on another organized political group”</td>
<td>Separatists vs. Opposition Parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ Armed separatists in the Anglophone regions have kidnapped hundreds of people, including at least 100 SDF members since December 2019.⁴⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State-on-Party:</strong> “any illegitimate action or threat of violence exerted by representatives of the State – civil servants or members of security forces – to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail or abuse leaders or members of a political party”</td>
<td>CPDM vs. Opposition Parties⁵⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ In the Election in 2018, President Biya was declared the winner with 71 percent of the vote, with Maurice Kamto, leader of the CRM, receiving 14 percent.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>■ A day after the elections, Kamto declared himself the winner and called on Biya to hand over power peacefully.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ The government used force to disrupt the CRM’s rallies and between 26–31 January 2019, Kamto and an estimated 200 members and supporters of his party were arrested.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party-on-State:</strong> “any action or threat of violence exerted by an organized political group against the representatives, employees, properties or symbols of the State”</td>
<td>Separatists vs. CPDM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ Separatists burned at least three offices of ELECAM; two in Northwest region, on 7 January and 16 January 2020; and one in South-West region, on 2 February.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>■ Separatists have also burned down a post office where electoral material was stored in Bafut, Northwest region, on the eve of the elections, and at least seven homes belonging to government officials and candidates in various localities in the Northwest region since November 2019.⁶⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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32 (IFES, 2014, p. 31)  
33 (ibid., p. 37)  
34 (Human Rights Watch, 2020)  
35 (ibid.)  
36 (IFES, 2014, p. 33)  
37 (Human Rights Watch, 2020)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party-on-Voter: “any action or threat of violence exerted by an organized political group on a citizen or group of citizens for reasons other than their political affiliation”.&lt;sup&gt;38&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separatists vs. Civilians</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Separatists have also been accused of torture, arson, kidnapping, attacking and killing civilians and traditional chiefs accused of supporting the government.&lt;sup&gt;39&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Separatists have allegedly brutally attacked, shot, harassed and kidnapped students, teachers and administrators on their way to school to enforce a school boycott in the Anglophone regions.&lt;sup&gt;40&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ During mid-August 2020, armed separatists allegedly killed 13 civilians, including three aid workers and two teachers, decapitating three women.&lt;sup&gt;41&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boko Haram vs. Civilians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ During 2019 the group committed atrocities in the far north of Cameroon, killing at least 225 civilians.&lt;sup&gt;42&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-on-Voter: “any abusive action or threat of violence exerted by representatives of the State, be they civil servants or members of security forces, to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail or abuse a citizen or a group of citizens.”&lt;sup&gt;43&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPDM vs. Civilians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Social media users and individuals who possess or distribute anti-government material have also faced arrest.&lt;sup&gt;44&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Security forces’ “scorched earth” tactic of burning and razing villages suspected of harbouring separatists has resulted in more than 200 villages allegedly raided or partially destroyed.&lt;sup&gt;45&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ E.g. Ngarbuh Massacre: security forces and allied Fulani militia reportedly killed nearly two dozen people, including at least 13 children, suspected of harbouring separatists in February 2020.&lt;sup&gt;46&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Between 17-20 January 2020, security forces carried out a military operation in Bali, Northwest region, destroying over 50 homes and killing several civilians, including two men with intellectual disabilities.&lt;sup&gt;47&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ The government arbitrarily arrested hundreds of civilians.&lt;sup&gt;48&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Since 2016 at least 3,000 civilians have been killed in the Anglophone regions.&lt;sup&gt;49&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<sup>38</sup> (IFES, 2014, p. 32)  
<sup>39</sup> (USHMM, 2020)  
<sup>40</sup> (USHMM, 2020)  
<sup>41</sup> (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020)  
<sup>42</sup> (ibid.)  
<sup>43</sup> (IFES, 2014, p. 36)  
<sup>44</sup> (Freedom House, 2019)  
<sup>45</sup> (USHMM, 2020)  
<sup>46</sup> (ibid.)  
<sup>47</sup> (Human Rights Watch, 2020)  
<sup>48</sup> (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020)  
<sup>49</sup> (ibid.)
### TABLE 3 – ATROCITY CRIMES RISK FACTORS IN CAMEROON

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
<th>Factors present in Cameroon</th>
<th>Fake News as Direct Trigger of Atrocity Crimes</th>
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</table>
| **Situations of armed conflict or other forms of instability** | ■ Political instability caused by transfer of power.  
■ Disputes over power.  
■ Political tensions caused by autocratic regimes  
■ Economic instability caused by scarcity of resources.  
■ Social instability caused by mass protests against State authority.  
■ Social instability caused by identity issues. | Economic cost of 93-day internet shutdown between January and April was $38.8 million. On 5 January 2020, separatists burned down the home of Wilfred Fusi Naamukong, a member of parliament from the SDF in Mankwi, Northwest region.  
■ Kidnappings and intimidations against political actors are examples of low-level violence.  
However, "If this type of violence is left simmering, it can suddenly erupt, causing irreparable damage to lives, property and the electoral process". |
| **Record of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law** | ■ Denial of violations of international human rights.  
■ Widespread mistrust in State institutions.  
Distrust as a result of impunity. | Mistrust in government and denial of violation of human rights when graphic videos of Cameroonian soldiers killed unarmed civilians in the separatist regions were shared online.  
Government stated these videos were fake, but they were verified as real by Amnesty International. |
| **Weakness of state structures** | ■ Lack of independent and impartial judiciary.  
■ High levels of corruption and poor governance.  
■ Inadequate mechanisms of accountability.  
■ Lack of resources for reform or institution building. | Currently there is one Facebook third-party fact-checking network in Cameroon vs. ten in USA and three in Kenya/DRC/Nigeria (September 2020).  
■ This is conducted by Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency. (Broadband Commission, 2020, p. 75) |

50 (United Nations, 2014, pp. 10-17)  
51 (CIPESA, 2020, p. 15)  
52 (Human Rights Watch, 2020)  
53 (IFES, 2014, p. 18)  
54 (Quartz Africa, 2018)  
55 (Broadband Commission, 2020, p. 73)
| **Motives or incentives** | Tensions over distribution of resources.  
■ Strategic territorial interests.  
■ Ethnic tensions  
■ Politicization of past grievances. | Ethnic tensions utilized by “spread of falsehood by activists in order to reinforce resistance on Anglophone Cameroonians against the government”. |
| **Capacity to commit atrocity crimes** | Capacity to encourage or recruit large numbers of supporters and mobilize them. | Separatist militants in restive region were using Facebook for mobilization.56 |
| **Absence of mitigating factors** | Lack of free, diverse and independent national media. | The CPJ reported that seven journalists were imprisoned at the end of 2019.57  
Government are weaponizing “fake news” by arresting journalists.  
Government exploiting 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.58 |
| **Enabling circumstances or preparatory action** | ■ Imposition of strict control on the use of communication channels (ban on free speech).  
■ Increase inflammatory rhetoric or hate speech targeting protected groups/populations. | Government officials told the Facebook executives their platform was being used to mislead youths and spread fake news and hate speech.59 (Quartz Africa, 2018)  
To combat this, the government has tried to control the spread of information and the use of the internet to organize protesters by shutting down the internet in those regions.60  
■ Facebook and WhatsApp were blocked in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon – important block against separatist mobilization.61 |

56 (Quartz Africa, 2018)  
57 (Freedom House, 2019)  
58 (CIPESA, 2020, p. 12)  
59 (Quartz Africa, 2018)  
60 (Quartz Africa, 2018)  
61 (CIPESA, 2020, p. 13)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triggering factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfers of power.</td>
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<td>National/religious events</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Acts of incitement or hate speech.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elections and measures to destabilize them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>National holidays that can exacerbate tensions between groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acts related to accountability processes and perceptions of unfairness.</td>
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A television report in the aftermath of the 2018 election showed supposed Transparency International observers praising the electoral process.62

- This caused confusion and controversy; Transparency International issued a statement after the report aired asserting that they had no election observers in Cameroon.

Propaganda, hate speech, violent content and disinformation are increasingly spreading on the Cameroonian cyberspace, fuelling ethnocentrism and a crisis.63

Examples of hate speech.64

- Anglo-fou: A combination of “Anglophone” and “fou”, which in this context means mad, foolish, primitive. It is used in an offensive way by the Francophone community to indicate a submissive position of the Anglophone person.
- Rat: Rats are animals that should be combated and killed. It is used about the Anglophone people who fight for independence, and about Anglophone people in general.
- Cam no go: It refers to a foreigner who is not welcome. In the past, it has been used as a slang for a skin disease that was hard to get rid of. Today, it is used to express that the Anglophone population does not belong in Cameroon.
- Ambazozo: Refers to Anglophone population and expresses through “zo” that they are zombies, or that they should be locked up in a zoo like animals.

62 (Freedom House, 2019)  
63 (Internet Without Borders, 2018)  
64 (HSC, 2020)
Fake news and misinformation are widespread in Cameroon and should be viewed primarily as a tool that sows distrust in the electoral process, making electoral violence, and thereby atrocity crimes, more likely. Fake news and misinformation can directly lead to electoral violence when utilized in a way that reduces citizens’ trust in political, judicial, and especially electoral, institutions. Institutions that “work to instil confidence in the electoral process can reduce or eliminate many triggers of political violence and unrest”. (IFES, 2014, p. 17).

It is evident, in Table 2, that electoral violence is present in Cameroon. However, it is less clear whether fake news and misinformation directly caused this violence. Instead, we can conclude that fake news helps to mobilize the actors of this violence since there is evidence that both the government and separatist forces have spread misinformation regarding the other side.

Finally, the likelihood of this resulting in atrocity crimes is strongest when the misinformation is used to mobilize civilian support through the exacerbation of existing cultural differences, therefore amounting to hate speech. It is this virulent application of fake news that fuels both electoral violence and atrocity crimes since citizens’ distrust is no longer confined to institutions but extends to human beings.


