



# Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Cameroon's opposition leader Maurice Kamto continues to dispute the 2018 presidential election results, while his supporters and President Paul Biya's exchange invective that often descends into ethnic slurs. Fuelled by online trolling, such hate speech is leading to violence.

**Why does it matter?** Tensions between the Biya and Kamto camps, increasingly framed along ethnic lines, threaten national stability, already rocked by the separatist insurgency in the country's Anglophone regions. These strains risk tearing at Cameroon's national fabric, with more bloodshed likely if the government takes no corrective action.

**What should be done?** The government should correct deficiencies in the electoral system that undermined the 2018 elections and outlaw ethnic discrimination. Facebook, the country's most used social media platform, should work with the government, opposition and civil society to limit inflammatory content or misinformation lest intercommunal relations break down further.

## *Executive Summary*

Political and ethnic tensions unleashed by the disputed 2018 presidential election still roil Cameroon, already facing a separatist insurgency in its Anglophone regions. Defeated opposition politician Maurice Kamto continues to challenge the vote's outcome, while President Paul Biya shows no sign of wanting to relinquish power after 38 years in office. Their supporters are now insulting each other with ethnic slurs online, especially in the country's most popular social media forum, Facebook. Ethnic strains are rising alongside hate speech, trends that, if they escalate, could endanger Cameroon's stability. To cool things down, the government should enter talks with its opponents about the electoral system and move to make that system fairer. It should introduce legislation barring ethnic discrimination and empower the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism to enforce quotas for the country's many ethnic groups in public institutions. For its part, Facebook should do more to filter out hate speech and promote verified content to limit the spread of misinformation.

The dispute over the 2018 presidential vote, which many observers, including the Catholic Church, criticised as flawed, continues to shape Cameroonian politics. Since electoral authorities declared him runner-up to Biya, Kamto has contested the result, culminating in his February 2019 arrest on charges of insurrection, sedition and inciting violence. Even after leaving prison in October 2019, he has regularly lambasted the government for its failure to reform the electoral system. He and his party boycotted municipal and parliamentary elections in February 2020. Their abstention left the ruling party with an overwhelming majority in parliament, meaning that the government's main rivals are not there to engage it in debate about the country's major problems.

Kamto and his allies continue to butt heads with the government on the country's most divisive issues. Kamto, himself part of Cameroon's Francophone majority, criticises the government for holding elections in which few Anglophones could vote due to violence and a separatist-led boycott. He accuses Biya of mishandling the Anglophone crisis by prioritising force over dialogue. During street protests, he has advocated for the release of jailed separatist leaders, leading the government to depict him as a dangerous rabble rouser. Among both Biya's supporters and Kamto's, many frame the political dispute as a competition for power between their respective ethnic groups – between, on one hand, Biya's Bulu group, indigenous to the Francophone South region, and the Beti of the Francophone Centre with whom the Bulu identify; and, on the other, Kamto's Bamileke, indigenous to the Francophone West.

The COVID-19 pandemic and regional elections that the government has called for in December have only exacerbated tensions. Kamto asked parliament to vote on whether the president, who was absent from public view for some weeks when coronavirus infections started to spread, was still fit to govern. On 22 September, after Biya announced that elections of regional councillors would take place in two months' time, Kamto launched peaceful street protests with the stated aim of ousting the president.

As the political temperature has risen, Cameroonian politicians and the public are making more use of social media to press home their messaging and their views.

While the growth of social media has been a boon for free speech, the sector is weakly regulated. Activists of all political persuasions use it to propagate misinformation, widen ethnic divides and even incite violence. Inflammatory content online pitting Bulu and Beti against Bamileke has stoked tensions. Online videos of anti-Biya protests in Geneva in June 2019 prompted MPs from the South – largely Biya loyalists – to accuse emigres from the West, who are generally regarded as Kamto supporters, of tribalism. Violence broke out among these groups in Sangmelima in the South in October 2019, although it caused no fatalities. While it is hard to make a direct causal link, the juxtaposition of online antagonism and real-life skirmishes raises concern that the former could stoke the latter.

Neither side has taken action to temper its supporters' rhetoric. Senior Cameroonian officials voice concerns over the online vitriol but have done little to reduce it. Any action the government takes in the name of curbing hate speech is usually a smokescreen for repressing its opponents. As for the opposition, it has done little to moderate its supporters' tone, either, instead blaming the government for tribalising politics to sow division among Cameroonians who oppose Biya. For their part, national communications watchdogs remain under-resourced and distrusted by the public, without clear mandates to tackle what could be a threat not just to the government but to the country's stability. Facebook itself does not devote adequate resources to stopping toxic online discourse.

If the logic of ethnic politics takes root, today's tensions could extend into still worse inter-ethnic disputes as the ruling party and opposition position themselves for the end of Biya's presidency. Such a scenario could pose a grave threat to a country that counts over 250 ethnic communities. It would be particularly tragic given that intercommunal relations have traditionally been reasonably harmonious, at least nationally (there have been frequent bouts of local ethnic violence, usually over land). The government, opposition and social media companies can all play a role in soothing frictions:

- ❑ First and foremost, the government should initiate dialogue with the opposition outside parliament to build consensus on electoral reform. President Biya and his party have little enthusiasm for such reform, but it appears to be the only way to bridge the widening gulf between them and their rivals. Without it, opposition frustration will grow and feed even more ethnic division, a genie that at some point will be hard to put back in the bottle. Reforms might include introduction of a single ballot, as opposed to the multiple ballot system Cameroon currently uses that is open to manipulation, a more independent national elections body, timelier and more transparent election results.
- ❑ The government should bar ethnic discrimination in public-sector employment by introducing amendments to expand the scope of the law proscribing "contempt of tribe". It should also reform the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, a body established in 2017 but which is under-resourced and currently only has an advisory role, to redress such discrimination.
- ❑ Facebook should ramp up its capacity – including through hiring more content moderators familiar with Cameroonian political culture – to sift through online content and identify inflammatory posts, with the aim of more proactively cen-

soring such material. It should increase its outreach to actors across the political spectrum and work with them to better evaluate toxic content. For their part, the government and opposition parties should push their supporters to adopt responsible online community standards.

- Working with government institutions, the opposition and civil society actors, Facebook should redouble efforts to ensure that it has verified their pages. By promoting verified pages, the company can assist users in differentiating bona fide information sources from misinformation.

Obstacles stand in the way of such steps. President Biya himself may resist measures he perceives as jeopardising his position. Many in the ruling party, with their eye on keeping power after Biya's departure, will feel the same. Politicians on all sides have been too slow to condemn divisive rhetoric. Moreover, trusting the government alone to curb inflammatory speech would run the risk that it would use such measures to crack down on rivals. Outside pressure, for the most part behind the scenes, from those with influence in Cameroon – notably the U.S., the African Union, France and other European countries – will be crucial in pushing for electoral reform.

Still, both camps possess politicians who recognise the danger. President Biya himself should be wary of leaving behind a country riven apart not only by fighting and mounting separatist sentiment in Anglophone areas but also by wider tensions endangering Cameroon's historically relatively amicable inter-ethnic relations. Acting now to mend fences with his opponents and cooperating with Facebook to stem hate speech would go some way toward minimising that risk.

**Yaoundé/Nairobi/Brussels, 3 December 2020**

# Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline

## I. Introduction

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Political and ethnic tensions in Cameroon have risen in tandem since the country's contested 2018 presidential election, sowing further division in a country reeling from fighting between separatist insurgents and a heavy-handed military in its Anglophone regions. Supporters of President Paul Biya and leading opposition politician Maurice Kamto, released in October 2019 after nine months in prison on charges of insurrection, sedition and inciting violence, increasingly pitch their rivalry in ethnic terms. The politicisation of ethnicity is driving polarisation, with hostility on the rise between, on one hand, Bulu and Beti, perceived by numerous Cameroonians as close to Biya and prevalent in the South and Centre regions, and on the other, Kamto's Bamileke, a community indigenous to the Francophone West but also with a heavy presence in cities across the country. A rash of communal attacks involving these groups in the southern town of Sangmelima in October 2019 illustrates the violence that could unfold as a result.

The Biya-Kamto acrimony has its origins in the 2018 election, which the opposition leader has repeatedly said was fraudulent and should be annulled. The opposition wants a new vote and hopes to push through some reforms beforehand. It fears that the 87-year-old president could resign or die before his term is over in 2025, necessitating a snap election as per the constitution, which would make any reform harder to achieve before a vote. Under the country's current flawed electoral system, the ruling party would be better able to control a snap election than a regular one where the opposition has time to campaign. The Biya-Kamto dispute has spilled over into other issues of national importance, from the Anglophone crisis to the government's handling of COVID-19. In December 2019, Cameroon's Catholic bishops warned that political elites were sowing divisions that could lead to ethnic conflict.<sup>1</sup> Making matters worse, internet trolls from across the political spectrum have used Facebook, the most popular social media site in the country with nearly 4 million users, to disseminate hate speech.

This report, building on previous Crisis Group publications on the 2018 presidential contest and February 2020 local elections, traces how the crisis has ratcheted up ethnic tensions.<sup>2</sup> It lays out electoral reforms that could help resolve the dispute and calm associated communal animosity. It also explores what the government, opposition and social media companies, notably Facebook, can do to minimise inflammato-

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<sup>1</sup> Pastoral letter of the National Episcopal Council of Cameroon, signed on behalf of Catholic bishops by Monsignor Abraham Kome, bishop of Bafang and apostolic administrator of Bafia, 10 December 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°142, *Cameroon: Divisions Widen ahead of Presidential Vote*, 7 October 2018; Hans De Marie Heungoup, "Uncertainties Deepen in Cameroon after Divisive Election", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 November 2018; Arrey Ntui, "Cameroon: Elections Raise Prospect of Further Ruling-party Dominance", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 February 2020.

ry online content. It does not address the policies needed to resolve the Anglophone crisis or deal with COVID-19 but argues that meeting these challenges is impossible unless Cameroon's leaders first soothe ethno-political tensions nationwide. During research between June 2019 and October 2020, Crisis Group spoke with government officials, politicians, diplomats, academics, civil society actors, traditional leaders, journalists and social media professionals.

Crisis Group is part of Facebook's Trusted Partner Program and in that capacity has been in contact with Facebook officials in various countries concerning misinformation on the platform that could provoke deadly violence. For this report, Crisis Group spoke to and exchanged information with numerous Facebook officials throughout 2020. Their feedback is reflected throughout the text.

## II. Rising Political Tensions

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The disputed 2018 presidential election marked a sharp deterioration of Cameroon's crisis, which the opposition boycott of the 2020 parliamentary and local polls has worsened. As political tensions have steadily risen, they have taken on a worrying ethnic dimension, fuelling a concomitant escalation of ethnic division between Biya's supporters, on one hand, and those of his chief opponent Kamto, on the other.

### A. Kamto's Rise and the Acrimonious 2018 Election

Maurice Kamto's rise as opposition leader is recent. In 1992, he supported what was then Cameroon's leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), when it put forward John Fru Ndi for president. By 2004, however, he had joined Biya's government as junior minister of justice.<sup>3</sup> He resigned in 2011, complaining of deteriorating rule of law and development failures. The following year, he founded, and then became head of, the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC). The new party, benefitting from the SDF's long-term decline, has become the government's leading adversary, at least in Francophone areas, where it has attracted many former SDF backers.<sup>4</sup> In the run-up to the 2018 election, Kamto won the backing of several small parties and politicians, including Akere Muna, a prominent Biya challenger, who withdrew from the race and endorsed the MRC leader.<sup>5</sup> Kamto's growing profile and apparent popularity suggested there might be a real contest, at least in large urban centres. Still, Biya's nationwide support and control of state resources meant the opposition challenger faced an uphill struggle.

In Francophone regions, the election was largely peaceful, though shortcomings in the conduct of the campaign and vote were reportedly widespread. In some places, ruling-party members burned the MRC's campaign materials, while in others gov-

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<sup>3</sup> An Anglophone, John Fru Ndi was the SDF's chairman from its founding in 1990. In the 1992 presidential election, he was backed by the Union for Change, a coalition comprising opposition parties and civil society. He lost and accused Biya of rigging the vote. In 1997, the SDF won 23.5 per cent of seats in parliament to the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement's (CPDM) 48 per cent. In the early 2000s, however, it began a steady decline as senior figures left to form small rival parties. Stripped of its electoral fiefdom in the Anglophone regions when the Anglophone crisis broke out in 2016, the SDF and Fru Ndi ceded their position as the country's most vibrant opposition to the MRC and Kamto in mid-2018.

<sup>4</sup> In the 2018 presidential election, the MRC's candidate, Kamto was runner-up with 14.23 per cent while the SDF's candidate Joshua Osih was fourth with 3.35 per cent. It was the first time since the country returned to multiparty politics in 1990 that an SDF presidential candidate had failed to finish second.

<sup>5</sup> On 8 August 2019, a senior SDF member, Célestin Djamen, resigned to join the MRC. Three weeks before the election, six small parties offered Kamto their support and on 20 September, Christian Penda Ekoka, leader of the ACT-AGIR political movement and a former Biya adviser, followed suit. Crisis Group Briefing, *Cameroon: Divisions Widen ahead of Presidential Vote*, op. cit. Muna withdrew two days before the vote. The electoral body, Elections Cameroon, rejected his request to withhold his name from balloting, arguing that the law did not provide for withdrawal of candidates. Voters at many polling stations were confused and, according to the official tally, cast 12,259 ballots for Muna despite his withdrawal. Crisis Group interview, Akere Muna, Yaoundé, June 2019.

ernment officials blocked its meetings.<sup>6</sup> In the North, traditional elites reportedly instructed people for whom to vote (almost always the ruling party) and on election day, some people voted under the name of other registered voters without their knowledge, at times with polling agents' complicity.<sup>7</sup> Despite having previously offered assurances that it would not do so, the electoral body, Elections Cameroon, placed polling stations inside a military facility in Ngaoundere and in traditional chiefs' palaces elsewhere, where voters felt pressured to vote for the incumbent.<sup>8</sup> Observers claimed that polling officers attempted to bribe them and that officials arrested opposition poll monitors. They also reported missing opposition ballots in some places, ballot stuffing and disputes over tallies.<sup>9</sup>

Campaigning and voting barely took place in the North West and South West, the two Anglophone regions. Anglophone separatists imposed a one-week curfew (or "lockdown") to enforce their boycott. Both the rebels and the army intimidated would-be voters – the rebels by kidnapping party supporters and destroying ballots; the army by posting soldiers at polling stations to distribute ballots (normally, police and election workers perform these tasks). In the North West, Elections Cameroon also slashed the number of polling stations from 2,300 to 74, citing security concerns, but thereby deterring potential voters who did not want to travel long distances to cast their ballots.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, clashes between separatists and the army led thousands to flee to Francophone regions, into the bush or to Nigeria, thus sacrificing their franchise. On election day, about a dozen people died in such clashes.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, turnout in Anglophone areas was low: roughly 10 per cent, contrasting with the national rate of 54 per cent, according to figures released by the Constitutional Council.<sup>12</sup>

The election outcome sparked immediate controversy. The day after voting, Kamto declared himself winner, pre-empting the official result.<sup>13</sup> Two weeks later, on 22 Oc-

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<sup>6</sup> On 14 July 2018, CPDM militants burned MRC publicity materials at a rally in Maroua. "Présidentielle 2018 : guerre ouverte entre le Rdpc et le Mrc dans l'Extrême Nord", *Journal du Cameroun*, 16 July 2018. In the South region, officials refused to authorise opposition parties' campaign rallies, according to a 16 November 2018 report from the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms. The rallies did not occur.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, October 2019.

<sup>8</sup> "Declaration on Election Observation", National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, 9 October 2018; "Election Présidentielle du 7 Octobre 2018 au Cameroun", *Femmes Camerounaises pour des Elections Pacifiques*, December 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interviews, political party officials, Yaoundé, June-September 2019. See also "Présidentielle au Cameroun : plusieurs partis d'opposition dénoncent des 'fraudes'", *Le Monde*, 9 October 2018.

<sup>10</sup> "Gunfire in Cameroon's Anglophone regions deters voters on polling day", *The Guardian*, 7 October 2018.

<sup>11</sup> "Election without electors in NW, SW", *The Sun*, 17 September 2018; "Crise anglophone: le Nord-Ouest et le Sud-Ouest se vident", *Le Messenger*, 17 September 2018; "Cameroon in angst over 'Ambazonia independence anniversary'", *Deutsche Welle*, 2 October 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "Cameroun : Paul Biya réélu président dans un pays morcelé", *Le Point*, 22 October 2018.

<sup>13</sup> "Cameroon opposition leader claims victory in undeclared election", video, YouTube, 13 October 2018. Kamto rejected the official results via a video posted to social media. Despite having argued for annulling the vote before the Constitutional Court, he announced an alternative tally that showed

tober, the Constitutional Council, the only body with a legal mandate to announce results, proclaimed Biya winner with an overwhelming 71 per cent of the vote, with Kamto coming in second with only 14 per cent. Prior to announcing the results, the Constitutional Council heard and dismissed petitions in which two opposition candidates, Kamto and the SDF's Joshua Osih, pleaded for an annulment on grounds of violence in the Anglophone regions, widespread fraud and incorrect tallies.<sup>14</sup> Most non-partisan observers thought it likely that Biya had won more votes than any of his rivals, even if the president's numbers were inflated, and foreign governments recognised his victory.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, important figures such as the head of the country's Catholic bishops' conference, Bishop Samuel Kleda, expressed doubt about the president's wide victory margin.<sup>16</sup>

With ill feelings running high, the dispute moved into the streets. Clashes pitted opposition protesters against security forces in early 2019. On 26 January, MRC supporters held protests in the political capital Yaoundé, the economic capital Douala, and Bafoussam in the Francophone West region, despite the authorities refusing to grant permission. Police and gendarmes intervened forcefully, using tear gas, water cannons and, in Douala, rubber bullets, injuring at least six demonstrators and arresting over 100.<sup>17</sup>

The Cameroonian diaspora in Europe also protested. Reacting to police violence in Cameroon, a few hundred people gathered at the Cameroon embassy in Paris on 26 January. Some managed to enter the embassy grounds and ransack its offices. Similar protests took place at the Berlin and Brussels embassies with varying degrees of intrusion.<sup>18</sup> The government accused Kamto of orchestrating these protests.<sup>19</sup> Such allegations appear to have little basis: while some Paris demonstrators had affiliations with political parties back home, most of the protesting diaspora did not.<sup>20</sup> In fact, many of Biya's opponents abroad opposed Kamto's participation in the 2018 election, fearing validation of a rigged process, and chose not to either register or vote.<sup>21</sup>

The authorities were quick to crack down. Ruling-party politicians were shocked and furious that a former minister such as Kamto would defy the government so open-

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him winning by a narrow margin. His party laid out an elaborate program of resistance named "Non au hold up", calling for protest marches in Cameroon and abroad.

<sup>14</sup> "Cameroon's Paul Biya 'easily' wins seventh term as president", Al Jazeera English, 22 October 2018. With very low turnout in its core supporters' districts in Anglophone regions, the SDF fared particularly badly; its candidate Osih got just 3 per cent of the vote. Cabral Libii of the UNIVERS party finished in third place with 6 per cent.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, election observers and journalists, Yaoundé, July and September 2019. See also "Cameroon's Presidential Election Results", press release, U.S. Department of State, 22 October 2018; "Cameroon – Result of the Presidential Election", press release, French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 23 October 2018.

<sup>16</sup> "Mgr Samuel Kleda s'interroge après l'élection au Cameroun", *Vatican News*, 24 October 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, party officials and journalists, Yaoundé and Douala, June–September 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Occasional diaspora protests have taken place since then. On 29 June, protesters demonstrated outside President Biya's hotel in Geneva. Swiss police used tear gas and water cannons to break up the gathering.

<sup>19</sup> "Ce que le gouvernement camerounais reproche à Maurice Kamto", *Deutsche Welle*, 29 January 2019.

<sup>20</sup> An informal association of mostly Francophone Cameroonian emigres, the Brigade Anti-Sardinards, claimed responsibility for the embassy intrusions.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official, MRC senior officer, Yaoundé, September 2019.

ly and take his dispute to the streets rather than seeking to resolve it in the courts. On 28 January 2019, the police arrested him and several senior MRC members. Over the following nine months, the government took hundreds more MRC supporters into custody, releasing some of them at intervals, including a group of 103 on 4 October, although some remain in detention for allegedly taking part in prison riots.<sup>22</sup>

Kamto's arrest in many ways was simply business as usual for a government that has long used lengthy pre-trial detention, or corruption charges, as means of blocking perceived rivals.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, since 2017, the government has used similar tactics to silence Anglophone militants. Ruling-party insiders and other informed observers judge that the decision to arrest Kamto was also motivated by fear among some in Biya's camp that, if unchecked, the opposition leader could disrupt the ruling party's plans to retain power when the president finally leaves office.<sup>24</sup>

#### B. "Dialogue" on the Anglophone Crisis and Prisoner Releases

Throughout much of 2019, the president maintained a hardline stance toward the Anglophone insurgency, despite increasing international concern.<sup>25</sup> The government carried out a brutal counter-insurgency campaign while blocking and delaying dialogue initiatives.<sup>26</sup> Separatists, for their part, continued to attack security forces.<sup>27</sup> From the start of the conflict to September 2019, over 2,000 civilians were killed and 530,000 internally displaced, while 50,000 more sought refuge in Nigeria. In September 2019, some 700,000 children faced a fourth year without school – the separatists' "lockdown" having shuttered schoolhouses.<sup>28</sup> The conflict had crippled the region's once vibrant economy.<sup>29</sup>

A dialogue initiative did little to end the violence. On 10 September, under mounting international pressure to bring an end to the bloodshed, Biya announced a national

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<sup>22</sup> The MRC was consumed throughout much of 2019 with desperate attempts to free its supporters from prison. At one point, Kamto and the party's First Vice President Mamadou Mota (arrested on 1 June 2019) were incarcerated, along with Alain Fogue, the party treasurer. Second Vice President Tiriane Balbine Noah led the party during this time. On 9 September, Mota and twelve other prisoners, including other MRC supporters and Anglophone activists, were given prison sentences ranging between two and three years for a riot on 22 July over poor detention conditions. Crisis Group interviews, MRC officials, June-September 2019. See also "Cameroun : 300 militants du MRC en garde à vue après des interpellations de masse", *Jeune Afrique*, 3 June 2019.

<sup>23</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°161, *Cameroon: The Dangers of a Fracturing Regime*, 24 June 2010. Crisis Group interviews, senior ruling-party official, Yaoundé, August 2019; opposition party official, Yaoundé, November 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, opposition politicians, government consultant and journalists, Yaoundé, June-October 2019.

<sup>25</sup> "Manifestation anti Paul Biya à Genève", Deutsche Welle, 30 June 2019. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yaoundé, June-July 2019; "European Parliament Resolution on Cameroon", European Parliament, 4 April 2019.

<sup>26</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°272, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, 2 May 2019.

<sup>27</sup> "Cameroon: Civil Society Organizations Raise the Alarm over Deteriorating Human Rights Situation", World Organisation Against Torture, 6 June 2019.

<sup>28</sup> "Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 9 – as of 31 July 2019", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, 31 July 2019.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

dialogue to address the conflict. Preparations fell far short of Anglophone expectations, giving too much weight to Francophone voices.<sup>30</sup> Although the government extended late invitations to about a dozen separatist figures, excluding those detained in Yaoundé, it did not make proper arrangements to ensure their immunity from arrest, leading the separatists to boycott the event.<sup>31</sup> It also refused to allow a proposed Anglophone General Conference, intended to produce a coherent, pragmatic Anglophone negotiating position, to go ahead.<sup>32</sup> As a result, Anglophones who participated in the dialogue came with no structured team or consensual set of demands, even if many welcomed the rare opportunity to air concerns.<sup>33</sup>

As the conference unfolded between 30 September and 4 October, it became clear that Biya would make no more than minor concessions. Biya's prime minister, Joseph Dion Ngute, himself an Anglophone, presided at the event and produced a set of conclusions. These stimulated rowdy debates, but in reality had been unilaterally prepared by the government and subsequently validated by the president. The main recommendation was special status for the Anglophone regions under the constitution's decentralisation provisions, which provide for regional councils, increased local responsibility and dedicated budgets for local development.<sup>34</sup>

Most Anglophones reacted angrily.<sup>35</sup> Separatists stepped up their campaign of violence immediately after the dialogue ended, describing its proposals as illegitimate and refusing to moderate their call for the "liberation" of Anglophone areas by force.<sup>36</sup> Even Anglophones who initially viewed the dialogue as a positive sign were rapidly disillusioned.<sup>37</sup>

The conference did lead to the release of hundreds of political prisoners. Partly in response to criticism of the conference and increasing international concern at the growing number of political incarcerations in the country, Biya began releasing pris-

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<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "Cameroon's Anglophone Dialogue: A Work in Progress", 26 September 2019.

<sup>31</sup> "Cameroon dialogue starts as Anglophone separatists pull out", Al Jazeera, 30 April 2019.

<sup>32</sup> The government refused to authorise the Anglophone General Conference despite pleas from prominent Cardinal Christian Tumi, who has long tried to find a solution to the Anglophone crisis. Crisis Group interviews, promoters of the Anglophone General Conference, Yaoundé, August–November 2019; Douala, December 2020; Yaoundé, February 2020. Crisis Group interviews, human rights lawyer, Buea, February 2020; newspaper publisher, Limbe, February 2020. See also Crisis Group Statement, "Cameroon's Anglophone Dialogue: A Work in Progress", op cit.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Anglophone civil society leaders, Yaounde and Buea, September–November 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Others included a recommendation that the government consider double nationality, long a point of contention for the diaspora, including Anglophones; diaspora representation in parliament; and steps to enhance the country's bilingualism and cultural diversity through strict enforcement of measures to ensure that representatives of all regions hold important government posts. On 24 December 2019, President Biya signed law No. 2019/024 to institute the general code of regional and local authorities, which granted special status to both of the Anglophone regions.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national dialogue participants, Yaoundé, October–November 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Anglophone separatist leaders, United States, November 2019. See also "Cameroon separatists celebrate 'independence' as dialogue is held", VOA, 2 October 2019; "Cameroon Lebialem fons (chiefs) say insecurity increases after national dialogue", BBC, 16 October 2019; "Cameroon separatist fighter names himself 'king' of Southwest district", VOA, 21 October 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national dialogue participants, Yaoundé, October 2019; Anglophone leader, Buea, February 2020.

oners toward the end of the dialogue.<sup>38</sup> On its penultimate day, the authorities dropped charges against and freed 333 Anglophone detainees, although neither prominent separatist leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe nor any of the nine colleagues arrested with him in Nigeria in January 2018 were released. The following day, Biya used his presidential powers to release 103 MRC supporters, including Kamto, but not the party's deputy leader, Mamadou Mota.<sup>39</sup> MRC militants welcomed their leader's release, as did the UN, France, the U.S. and the African Union.<sup>40</sup>

But the releases did not relieve tensions between the government and opposition. Both continued to trade barbs over the Anglophone crisis and the legitimacy of the past election.<sup>41</sup> Fresh out of jail, Kamto criticised the government-scripted dialogue and argued that talks with hardline Anglophone leaders were still necessary to stem the violence, a position firmly rejected by the government.<sup>42</sup> He maintained his stance that Biya had stolen the 2018 election, though at that point did not call for more protests.<sup>43</sup>

### C. *Flawed Parliamentary and Local Elections*

Legislative and local elections only widened divisions. In November, upon Kamto's release, the government announced that it would go ahead with long-delayed parliamentary and municipal elections. Soon thereafter, the MRC leader made it known that his party would boycott them and encouraged other parties to follow suit, saying the polls would likely be marked by massive fraud.<sup>44</sup> Kamto also argued that the vote should be delayed over concerns that the conflict-ridden Anglophone regions were not ready and that holding the elections without first resolving the situation there would be tantamount to accepting the country's partition.<sup>45</sup> The government countered that the elections were a constitutional requirement and should proceed, as they had already been postponed twice.<sup>46</sup>

Kamto's message chimed with the concerns of many Cameroonians who believe that the country's 2018 election was flawed. Many point in particular to the country's multiple ballot system, which facilitates corruption and bribery. According to this

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<sup>38</sup> "Au Cameroun, Paul Biya libère ses opposants", *La Croix*, 8 October 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, opposition officials, Yaoundé, October 2019. First arrested for protesting the election result on 1 June 2018, on 9 September of that year, Mota was sentenced to two years in jail for taking part in a 22 July protest by Anglophone prisoners for improvement of conditions at Kondengui Central Prison in Yaoundé. He denies the charges.

<sup>40</sup> "Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on Cameroon", UN, 5 October 2019; "Cameroon (5 Octobre 19)", French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 5 October 2019; "United States Welcomes Dropping of Charges against Political Opposition", press release, U.S. Embassy in Yaoundé, 5 October 2019; "Le président de la Commission de l'Union africaine, Moussa Faki Mahamat, salue la tenue du Grand Dialogue National au Cameroun", African Union, 5 October 2019.

<sup>41</sup> "Cameroun : 'Aller aux élections locales acterait la partition du pays'", *Le Monde*, 6 December 2019.

<sup>42</sup> "René Emmanuel Sadi : 'Nous n'entrevoyons pas de dialogue plus inclusif que celui historique qui vient d'avoir lieu'", CRTV, 19 October 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, Maurice Kamto, Washington, January 2020.

<sup>44</sup> "Cameroon's main opposition party to boycott February elections", Reuters, 25 November 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Maurice Kamto, Washington, February 2020.

<sup>46</sup> "Élections locales au Cameroun : face aux appels au boycott, le gouvernement refuse de céder", *Jeune Afrique*, 4 December 2019.

system, each voter receives separate pieces of paper for each candidate. After choosing one candidate, the voter puts the marked slip into an envelope and places it in the ballot box. The voter is then permitted to exit the polling station with the empty, uncast ballots for other candidates. A common method of bribery or voter intimidation is for ruling-party officials to wait outside and ask to see the uncast ballots. One glance at the slips reveals which one is missing, and thus whom the voter chose. At that point, the party official may reward or berate the voter according to how he or she voted. The system thus creates pressure on voters to cast ballots for the ruling-party candidate.

Kamto raised other concerns, too. These included other means of voter intimidation, such as the role of the army and traditional elites, as noted above, and the government's determination to manage parts of the process, including registering all observers rather than ceding that task to the electoral body. In 2019, opposition parties had advocated for revising the electoral code, adopting a single ballot, redrawing constituencies for parliamentary seats and completing computerisation of the electoral process – a job begun in 2012, but which had by the 2018 election only registered 6.8 million voters in its database from a potential 12 million in the country. The authorities largely ignored these calls (though in 2020 Elections Cameroon did continue slowly computerising voter rolls).<sup>47</sup> As the local elections approached, at least one other political party joined Kamto's boycott.<sup>48</sup>

The boycott was controversial. However much Kamto's supporters and other opposition parties believed he was right to call out the electoral system's failings, many were surprised by his refusal to participate, believing it would leave his party with no voice in domestic politics.<sup>49</sup> Kamto's calculus was likely influenced not only by shortfalls in the system, but also by the fact that government officials were frustrating the MRC's efforts to register its candidates and hold rallies, which he knew would weaken its performance if the party stayed in the polls.<sup>50</sup>

The boycott almost certainly reduced turnout. The Constitutional Council announced a low national voter participation rate of 43.79 per cent, but independent observers reported far lower turnout in some large conurbations, for example in Yaoundé and Douala, where it ranged between 15 to 28 and 17 to 39 per cent, respectively.<sup>51</sup> In the Anglophone regions, turnout was even lower, estimated by civil society

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<sup>47</sup> Franck Fout, "Cameroun : l'opposition mobilisée pour une modification du code électoral", *Jeune Afrique*, 4 January 2019.

<sup>48</sup> The MRC leader's call for a boycott was supported by other opposition parties, such as the Cameroon's People's Party, whose leader Kah Walla also held a boycott protest on 7 February 2020 in Yaoundé. See "Cameroon: Kah Walla welcomes Kamto's decision to boycott upcoming twin elections", *Journal du Cameroun*, 26 November 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, MRC supporters, December 2019. See also "Cameroun – MRC : Célestin Djamen désapprouve la mesure de boycott des élections municipales et législatives prise par le Directoire de son parti politique", Cameroon-Info.Net, 28 January 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Police prevented the MRC from holding rallies in Ebolowa and Yaoundé on 1 and 2 November 2019, respectively, after government officials banned the gatherings. Crisis Group interviews, MRC officials, Yaoundé, November 2019. "Ebolowa : le sous-préfet interdit des manifestations du MRC et du RDPC", *Journal du Cameroun*, 30 October 2019; "Manifestations interdites: le MRC s'entête", *Cameroon Tribune*, 4 November 2019.

<sup>51</sup> "Législatives et Municipales 2020 : l'Union Africaine souligne un taux d'abstention important aux élections locales au Cameroun", MSN, 14 February 2020; "Elections législatives : le RDPC rafle la mise", *Cameroon Tribune*, 2 March 2020.

observers at a mere 5 per cent. As in 2018, separatists imposed a lockdown to enforce their own boycott amid the deployment of hundreds of additional soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Again, thousands of Anglophones fled, fearing insecurity, as separatists kidnapped candidates and targeted electoral officials. Bus companies suspended service to and within the region, businesses remained shut and streets were empty. In many towns, separatist militias fired shots in the air on election day and clashed with soldiers guarding ruling-party campaign convoys.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to low turnout, reports of rigging tainted the elections. In the two Anglophone regions, the opposition accused ruling-party supporters of ballot stuffing, both to win and to conjure a mirage of higher participation.<sup>54</sup> Voters' sense that the government would control the outcome lowered expectations, and the consequent apathy helped ensure a mainly calm election in Francophone regions. In at least two towns, however, angry rival party monitors fought over voting materials. In one of those towns, Bourha, in the Far North, an irate mob attacked an Elections Cameroon official and ransacked a government office, protesting fraud after a local Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) candidate declared himself winner over his National Union for Democracy and Progress opponent.<sup>55</sup>

The election, and particularly Kamto's decision to boycott along with its ramifications, heralded a new phase in Cameroon's political crisis. With Kamto's party out of the contest, the CPDM won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary and local council seats. It increased its dominance in the National Assembly, taking 152 of 180 seats. The SDF slumped to five seats, lodging nineteen of the 40 petitions for parliamentary vote cancellation at the Constitutional Council. The Council ordered reruns for thirteen legislative seats, all in Anglophone areas, which took place on 22 March but returned the same results.<sup>56</sup> The CPDM also won control of 316 of the country's 360 local councils, while the SDF garnered just four councils, underlining the scale of its decline.<sup>57</sup> With the MRC out of the game due to its boycott and the SDF severely weakened, the country is effectively drained of credible opposition representation in national institutions just as it faces its most profound crisis since independence.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society election observers and election candidate, Yaoundé, Buea and Limbe, February 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society members, Buea and Yaoundé, February 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> "Bourha : la sous-prefecture saccagée après les élections", *Actu Cameroun*, 13 February 2020; "Cameroun : un maire accusé de mauvaise gestion dans l'Extrême Nord", *Actu Cameroun*, 9 June 2020. Following a complaint from officials of the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), a court cancelled the Bourha municipal election. While the UNDP is allied to the ruling party at the national level, this relationship does not exclude local rivalries due to competition between individual politicians.

<sup>56</sup> The Constitutional Council took two weeks to hear petitions and release results. It dismissed all petitions except those in eleven constituencies (thirteen seats) in the Anglophone regions. The 22 March reruns took place under the same conditions of violence and boycott. At least two people died of gunshot wounds in Bamenda on voting day. The SDF once again petitioned for a cancellation on the same grounds of fraud and violent disruption of voting, but the Council refused to change the results.

<sup>57</sup> The National Union for Democracy and Progress, a ruling-party ally, is now the second biggest at the local council level, with a majority in sixteen councils.

<sup>58</sup> Ntui, "Cameroon: Elections Raise Prospect of Further Ruling-party Dominance", op cit.

Violence in the Anglophone regions, meanwhile, continued unabated. On 14 February, security forces and pro-government vigilantes killed over a dozen women and children in Ngarbuh, Ntumbaw in the North West. The government at first denied any responsibility. But following a number of investigative reports by journalists and NGOs and ramped-up pressure from France, on 21 April the presidency admitted that security forces had killed the victims. Still, it maintained that the deaths were accidental, occurring during a firefight with separatists.<sup>59</sup>

On 6 September, Biya announced a regional councillors' election for December, drawing a bitter reaction from Kamto, and seemingly signalling a new confrontation between government and opposition. Kamto said street protests, which he described as peaceful but aimed at ousting Biya from power, would start on 22 September. With Cameroonians divided over his approach, described by the government as insurrectional, Kamto's supporters held minor marches in Douala and parts of the West region. The government increased security deployments in these areas and in Yaoundé, arresting many demonstrators.<sup>60</sup> Although the MRC will not participate in these indirect polls, in which CPDM-dominated local councils elect regional counterparts, it seems determined to use the elections to mobilise discontent with the government. It may see the December polls as the last chance to do so for some time, as no further elections are planned for five years.

#### D. COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has also fuelled tensions. At times, Cameroon's official infection rate was among the highest in Africa (by August 2020, the coronavirus had claimed close to 400 lives in the country). From early in the crisis, Kamto sought to take advantage of Biya's disappearance from public view as cases increased. On 27 March, he challenged Biya to prove he was alive and assume leadership of the COVID-19 response. Two weeks later, he asked the speaker of parliament's lower house to seize the Constitutional Council in order to declare a power vacancy.<sup>61</sup> The president reappeared on 16 April in an audience with the French ambassador, ending speculation that he was incapacitated or even dead.<sup>62</sup> The result of all this political theatre was more bad blood between Biya and Kamto.

Competition between the two men to launch fundraising campaigns to combat COVID-19 fed further polarisation. The spat started when Kamto created the *Survie Cameroon Survival Initiative* (SCSI) to pool diaspora contributions to fight the pandemic, raising €300,000 within days.<sup>63</sup> The government, fearful that the MRC leader's

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<sup>59</sup> "How an execution-style massacre unfolded in Cameroon", *The New Humanitarian*, 3 March 2020; "Cameroon: Massacre Findings Made Public", Human Rights Watch, 24 April 2020; Press release on official inquiry into the Ngarbuh killings of 14 February 2020, Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 21 April 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "Au Cameroun, des marches de l'opposition réprimées par les forces de l'ordre", *Le Monde*, 23 September 2020.

<sup>61</sup> "Au Cameroun, l'opposant Maurice Kamto dénonce la 'vacance de la présidence de la République'", *Le Monde*, 17 April 2020. Kamto argued that Biya was unfit to govern, due to his prolonged absences.

<sup>62</sup> "État de santé de Paul Biya : le Cameroun entre rumeurs et théories du complot", *Jeune Afrique*, 20 April 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "Coronavirus au Cameroun : les opérations de solidarité dans le viseur du gouvernement", *Jeune Afrique*, 10 April 2020.

effort would eclipse the president's own pandemic solidarity fund, banned Kamto's initiative, accusing his party of breaking the law by raising money from overseas.<sup>64</sup> Kamto ignored the ban and continued pursuing his target of €1 million. He hoped that the police, gendarmerie, health and finance ministries would co-manage the funds, together with a member of his coalition, to mount the country's coronavirus response.<sup>65</sup>

The government took further measures to address COVID-19 even as it impeded Kamto's initiative. On 15 April, Biya ordered the justice ministry to free more prisoners in order to decongest jails and lower the risk of mass transmission in the facilities. The order was carefully crafted to exclude those serving sentences for prison riots, such as the MRC's vice president.<sup>66</sup> Later in May, the government rejected a donation of medical supplies from Kamto and arrested six SCSI volunteers distributing masks and hand sanitiser in Yaoundé, while the police summoned senior MRC party officials for questioning.<sup>67</sup> The government and extra-parliamentary opposition continue to attack each other at every opportunity, and it remains unclear how the COVID-19 standoff will end.

#### E. Political Strains Turn Ethnic

Today's political divisions endanger decades of relative harmony among Cameroon's different ethnicities. Despite ethnic strife during the civil war from the 1950s to the early 1970s, many Cameroonians regard the country's diversity – it has approximately 250 ethnic groups, of which none dominates nationally – as a safeguard against communal violence. They see inflammatory language as a tool that politicians use during elections but that typically does not sour the overall climate of tolerance among ordinary people.<sup>68</sup> Of late, however, political strains may be turning ethnic to some

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<sup>64</sup> "Cameroon: Atanga Nji stings Kamto over coronavirus survival fund", *Journal du Cameroun*, 7 April 2020.

<sup>65</sup> On 7 April 2020, Penda Ekoka, whom Kamto had appointed to manage the funds raised for the COVID-19 response, wrote letters to government ministers inviting them to designate representatives to join the fund's management committee. See "Interdiction des collectes du MRC : Christian Penda Ekoka répond à Paul Atanga NJI", Agence Cameroun Presse, 8 April 2020.

<sup>66</sup> "Décret No. 2020/193 du 15 avril 2020 portant commutation et remise de peines", Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 15 April 2020.

<sup>67</sup> "'Survie Cameroun Survival Initiative' – trois accusations retenues contre Alain Fogue, trésorier du Mrc", *Actu Cameroun*, 14 May 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, politicians and community leaders, Yaoundé and South region, September–November 2019. This overall tolerance is reflected in harmonious social interaction in many of the country's cities, including ethnic intermarriage. According to a recent scholarly article, statistics from civil status registration centres in towns show that between 2008 and 2018, more than half the contracted marriages in the country's urban areas were between couples from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Kum Ngwuh, "The Realities of National Integration in Cameroon", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (March 2019). Cameroon has also known periods of high ethnic tensions, however, such as during the civil war from the mid-1950s to 1970, when French and government forces battled insurgents in the Littoral region and Bamileke-dominated West, who were fighting what they saw as a continuation of colonial rule behind a puppet government. Discord also emerged in 1982, this time between northerners and southerners, as President Ahmadou Ahidjo (from the North) resigned and Biya stepped in. In 1984, army officers attempted a coup, seemingly determined to put a northerner back in the presidential palace, but Biya survived.

degree, as the Kamto-Biya divide sets a pro-Kamto West, inhabited mostly by Bamileke, apart from a pro-Biya Centre-South, dominated by Beti and Bulu. Ethnic discord has even seeped into the Catholic Church, which suffers disputes along these same lines.<sup>69</sup> Activists linked to both the ruling party and opposition have fanned ethnic tensions by portraying their rivals as having an exclusive communal base and attributing ethnically stereotyped negative characteristics to each other.<sup>70</sup>

Ethnically charged language appears to be stoking these divisions. Government supporters, in part using their control of public and some private media, consistently underline the MRC leader's Bamileke origin, insinuating that his party has an inherent ethnic bias. Kamto himself seemed to reinforce an ethnic interpretation by suggesting he was denied victory in 2018 because of his ethnicity.<sup>71</sup> On 4 July 2019, ten pro-Biya parliamentarians from the South suggested that the MRC and Bamilekes were responsible for violent demonstrations at embassy sites in Europe, an unfounded attempt to paint anti-government protest as ethnically driven.<sup>72</sup> Officials and pro-government academics have made other worrying pronouncements, including through state media, some of which include incitements to violence.<sup>73</sup>

Contrary to pro-government rhetoric, a closer look at the MRC's leadership shows that no one ethnic group dominates the party. When Kamto was detained, his deputy, Mamadou Mota, who is not a Bamileke and who hails from Tokombere in the Far North, actively led the party. When Mota, too, was detained, a Beti woman from the Centre region, Tiriane Noah, took over. The party's secretary general is an Anglophone from the North West. Moreover, many wealthy Bamileke continue to be a key source of funds and support for the ruling party, likely fearing that doing otherwise might jeopardise their business interests.<sup>74</sup>

Partisan rhetoric has lent itself to stereotyping and hate speech. Government supporters have coined the term *tontinard* for MRC members, a slur derived from the word *tontine*, an informal self-help loan scheme widely practiced among the Bamileke.<sup>75</sup> Detractors associate the *tontine* with greed, a characteristic that some

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, religious official and politician, Yaoundé, September 2019.

<sup>70</sup> "Cameroun : Mathias Eric Owona Nguini, Patrice Nganang et le poison du tribalisme", *Jeune Afrique*, 24 June 2019 ; "Cameroun : le péril de la fracture identitaire", Observatoire Pharos, 12 May 2020.

<sup>71</sup> On 16 October 2019, Kamto declared at the Constitutional Council: "If there is a competitive exam to become Bulu, show me. I will take it". "Plaidoirie 2 de Maurice KAMTO au Conseil Constitutionnel", video, YouTube, 17 October 2019.

<sup>72</sup> In a document titled "Déclaration des Députés à l'Assemblée Nationale Ressortissants de la Région du Sud", dated 4 July 2019, ten MPs from President Biya's South condemned the embassy protests, accused participants of tribal ambitions and added, threateningly, that the vandals have no monopoly on violence.

<sup>73</sup> On 3 February, on the government-controlled CRTV television channel, a deputy minister of justice accused Kamto of displaying ethnic bias and thereby, the minister claimed, inviting hatred of the Bamileke. "Cameroun : un ministre accusé de propos antisémites après avoir visé les Bamilékéés", *Jeune Afrique*, 4 February 2019; "Appel aux génocides : l'urgence de se ressaisir", *Actu Cameroun*, 19 July 2019; "Les députés de la région du sud s'attaquent à la brigade anti sardinard", Facebook post by Le TGV de l'Info, 6 July 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interviews, political party members, Bafoussam and Yaoundé, September 2019. "Régionales au Cameroun : qui pour présider l'Ouest ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 30 September 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, politicians, civil society activists, Yaoundé, June-September 2019.

government supporters are keen to attribute to the Bamileke, many of whom are prominent in Cameroon's business world. In response, opposition supporters have minted a new insult for CPDM followers, *sardinard*.<sup>76</sup> That term is derived from the ruling party's practice of sharing bread and sardines during rallies. It is used to denote the illegitimate use of public resources to buy political support. Many MRC backers use this word to portray the Beti and Bulu as corrupt and incapable of prospering without government patronage.

In the South, an area long dominated by the ruling party, mounting ethnic tension appears to have contributed to riots in 2019 by groups of indigenous Bulu targeting Bamoun and Bamileke, who originate in the West.<sup>77</sup> On 10 October, hundreds of townsfolk in Sangmelima attacked mostly Bamilekes, Bamouns (also from the West and related to the Bamileke) and northerners with sticks and stones, destroyed their property and looted their shops after locals blamed a Bamoun from the West for complicity in the murder of a local motorbike taxi driver.<sup>78</sup> Locals continued their rampage for two days, causing several hundred people to flee to their region of origin.<sup>79</sup> The rioting prompted calls by some social media activists for Bamilekes to arm themselves but the government quickly held intercommunity talks, which calmed the situation.<sup>80</sup> The violence was exacerbated by underlying tensions over land rights, particularly accusations that migrants to the area, often Bamileke, buy up land illegitimately and occupy the best placed shops.<sup>81</sup>

While political tensions have most sharply reflected rivalry between Bamileke, on one hand, and Beti and Bulu on the other, 25 April 2019 clashes in Obala, a small town 45km from Yaoundé in the Centre region, suggest that other ethnic fault lines could open up if political turbulence continues.<sup>82</sup> During these incidents, local Beti clashed with Hausa immigrants from the North, whom locals perceive as opposition sympathisers. After one person was killed in a dispute between a Beti native and a Hausa migrant, youths from the two groups attacked each other with machetes and arrows, wounding twelve people.<sup>83</sup>

A new government policy requiring city mayors to be selected from the region's indigenous population may make things worse. In December 2019, the government

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yaoundé, Douala, June-September 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local leaders, South region, October and November 2019. See also "Émeutes à Sangmelima: Le LAAKAM réagit aux émeutes de Sangmelima", *Cameroun* 24, 17 October 2019; "Violences de Sangmélima: la vérité qu'on a caché au peuple", *CamerounWeb*, 17 October 2019.

<sup>79</sup> "Cameroun – Émeutes à Sangmelima : Alors qu'un calme précaire règne dans la ville, le chroniqueur David Eboutou relate une suite de scènes effroyables", *Cameroun-Info.Net*, 12 October 2019; "Sangmélima : la ville retrouve son calme", *CRTV*, 14 October 2019.

<sup>80</sup> "Appel au génocide : Grégoire Owona recadre Nganang", *Le Bled Parle*, 4 July 2019.

<sup>81</sup> The National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms has documented nineteen communal clashes related to land disputes between 2014 and 2019. This count is likely to be an underestimate. Local groups throughout the country accuse Bamilekes of being "land grabbers", despite the fact that they generally pay on a willing seller basis. Crisis Group interviews, human rights officials, Yaoundé, September 2019.

<sup>82</sup> "Cameroun : le péril de la fracture identitaire", *op. cit.*

<sup>83</sup> "Affrontement d'Obala, ce qui s'est réellement passé !", *Journal du Cameroun*, 26 April 2019.

enacted the policy as an amendment to a law on regional and local authorities.<sup>84</sup> The new policy sowed resentment, especially among Bamileke, many of whom have migrated from the western highlands to major towns and cities in the central, southern and coastal areas. They see the new policy as a ploy to deny them political agency in the cities where they have settled and where migrant ethnic groups would otherwise likely dominate councils.<sup>85</sup> The law builds on a 2006 statute stipulating that local councils reflect the area's "sociological composition".<sup>86</sup> It will also likely frustrate migrants by obligating parties to exclude them from leadership positions, especially in Yaoundé and Douala, where people of migrant origin are a majority.

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<sup>84</sup> The indigenous eligibility requirement only concerns cities. There are twenty such large urban centres with special character, according to Cameroonian law. Non-indigenes are eligible to be small-town mayors and also head the subdivisional councils that make up cities. For example, the city of Douala is made up of six subdivisional councils, each headed by a mayor. Following the February 2020 municipal election, two of Douala's six subdivisional mayors are Bamilekes, who are non-indigenous to the area.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, indigenous leader, Douala, November 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Law No. 2006/004 of 14 July 2006 lays down the conditions governing the election of regional councillors.

### III. Social Media, Inflammatory Content and Misinformation

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Unable to freely express themselves in media dominated by Biya's administration and its allies for decades, government opponents, independent journalists and bloggers have leapt into the new social media space to get their messages across to Cameroon's domestic and diaspora audiences. In response, the government and its supporters have also upped their presence online. But just as platforms such as Facebook have democratised the media landscape, they have also opened it up for bigots and merchants of hate. Both pro-government and anti-government activists now use social media to spread inflammatory discourse, propaganda and misinformation.<sup>87</sup>

Social media use has exploded in recent years in Cameroon. The country of 26 million people had an internet penetration rate of 30 per cent as of January 2020, with 59 per cent of the 7.8 million internet users going online via smart phones.<sup>88</sup> Bloggers, activists and private television channels on social media have eaten into the audiences of state media franchises. For example, at least two small private television channels in Cameroon have pages on Facebook, where they have pulled in over 480,000 followers each, exceeding or roughly equalling the online audience of the state-owned CRTV.<sup>89</sup> Three political bloggers on Facebook, Mimi Mefo, Paul Chouta and Boris Bertolt (two of whom are abroad and one in jail in Cameroon), have over 100,000 followers each. They, along with others with large followings, generate debate on controversial issues and report news that state-controlled media prefer to skip. None of these particular actors themselves engage in hate speech.<sup>90</sup>

Often caught flat-footed by social media's fast-moving, interactive nature, the government has worked hard to ensure that its online presence keeps pace. Since 2018, President Biya's staff have overhauled his website and his previously little followed Facebook and Twitter accounts, making regular posts, blocking critics and promoting his statements. He now has over 900,000 followers on Facebook, making him Cameroon's most followed politician (and meaning that his online audience dwarfs that of state-owned media outlets). His communications team has seen to it that he is a verified user, the first political figure in Cameroon with that status at the

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<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society researchers, Yaoundé, September 2019; and Crisis Group observation of main social media platforms.

<sup>88</sup> "Digital 2020 Cameroon", Hootsuite and We Are Social, January 2020; "Le taux de pénétration de l'internet au Cameroun atteint 30% en 2020, grâce à l'arrivée de 570 000 nouveaux internautes", Investir au Cameroun, 24 February 2020. CRTV (radio and television) and the *Cameroon Tribune* (newspaper) are tightly controlled state-owned media. They have wide national reach.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group observation of online activity, 6 November 2020. The state-owned CRTV Facebook page had 527,881 followers, while Equinoxe TV had 535,327 and Canal 2 had 489,819.

<sup>90</sup> Mimi Mefo, who publishes at Mimi Mefo Info, had 256,101 followers as of 6 November 2020; Paul Tchouta, who publishes at Le TGV de l'Info, had 185,054 followers; and Boris Bertolt has pages that, combined, exceeded 100,000 followers as of November 2020. The Anglophone activist and pro-separation blogger Mark Bareta had over 120,000 followers in a single profile, but Facebook deleted all his accounts in February 2020. These bloggers are largely critical of the government. Their influence is such that many Cameroonians turn to them several times a day for fresh insights.

time.<sup>91</sup> In a clear sign that he understands social media's importance, the president announced his July 2018 decision to run for re-election via Twitter. At the same time, the government has increased the army and police's social media visibility, aiming to both polish the security forces' image amid the Far North and Anglophone conflicts and counter criticism of military abuses.<sup>92</sup> The ruling party has also set up a team of pro-government cyber-activists to occupy space online.<sup>93</sup>

As both opposition and government voices have proliferated online, so too have the inflammatory opinions of provocateurs, whom politicians often tolerate or encourage.<sup>94</sup> When addressing national issues, many social media users deploy old and new insults, such as *tontinard* and *sardinard*, against rivals.<sup>95</sup> Some directly incite violence, running live video shows calling for attacks against particular ethnic groups or cheering the security forces' violent crackdown on protesters.<sup>96</sup> Government supporters sometimes express the false view that the Brigade Anti-Sardinards, a group of anti-government protesters in the diaspora, is acting as an armed wing of the MRC.<sup>97</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, a U.S.-based Cameroonian published a video circulated widely on Facebook in July 2019 in which he called on Bamilekes to organise themselves against a Bulu-led government. This foray was condemned by prominent Cameroonian social media users, but others continue enjoining ethnic violence.<sup>98</sup>

The feedback loop between events in-country and in the diaspora has been greatly facilitated by the spread of social media. As discussed above, the January protests at embassies in Europe came just hours after, and were likely inspired by, police brutality against peaceful demonstrators in Douala and broadcast worldwide via social media. When, in July 2019, MPs from the South, Biya's area of origin, accused emi-

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<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interviews, internet company representatives, Yaoundé and via telephone, February 2020. Until February 2020, Biya was the sole verified politician in Cameroon on Facebook and also on Twitter. Subsequently, however, Twitter verified several government ministers as well as opposition leader Kah Walla.

<sup>92</sup> Three main social media pages post about the activities of Cameroon's armed forces. *Honneur et Fidélité*, present on both Facebook and Twitter, is the most active and most followed.

<sup>93</sup> "Au Cameroun, la 'brigade cybernétique' secrète des pro-Biya", *Jeune Afrique*, 16 June 2020. In August 2019, CPDM officials began funding a small group of online activists in response to dissent expressed in the diaspora after Kamto's arrest.

<sup>94</sup> "Cameroun : Mathias Eric Owona Nguini, Patrice Nganang et le poison du tribalisme", *op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interviews, social media researchers, Yaoundé, August 2019 and January-February 2020. Some common hate speech terms in Cameroon are: *bamilecon*, *anglofou*, *wadjo*, *porc*, frog, chop-broke-pot and, nowadays, *tontinard* and *sardinard*.

<sup>96</sup> For example, in the public Facebook group called Parle que beti, members regularly attack the Bamileke, Beti and/or Bulu, calling for violence, misrepresenting images and spreading fake news to discredit others.

<sup>97</sup> "Cameroun : les réseaux sociaux, nouvelle tribune d'expression des violences", *Camer.be*, 7 July 2019. The Brigade Anti-Sardinards is a group of Cameroonian activists in the diaspora, many of whom opposed Biya's long stay in power before the MRC emerged as the leading opposition force in the 2018 election. Their methods include vocal protests at hotels and other venues during the president's visits to foreign capitals. "Cameroun Politique – Chasse à Paul Biya à Genève : Le Front Uni de la diaspora camerounaise pour l'alternance sème le trouble l'hôtel Intercontinental de Genève", *Cameroun 24*, 14 October 2016.

<sup>98</sup> "Appel au génocide au Cameroun : Patrice Nganang et le poison du tribalisme", *Actu Cameroun*, 5 July 2019; "Appel au génocide : Grégoire Owona recadre Nganang", *Le Bled Parle*, 4 July 2019.

gres from the West, Kamto's area of origin, of being behind the anti-Biya protests in Geneva, the charge was shared widely on social media.<sup>99</sup>

Misinformation is also on the rise, manipulating people's emotions amid political tensions and further fuelling inflammatory discourse. It proliferates every time a contentious new issue emerges.<sup>100</sup> Much of it aims to spread disinformation about key political actors and events. For example, on the eve of the October 2018 presidential election, social media users falsely claimed that Kamto was bribing another candidate to support him.<sup>101</sup> Following the election, as the dispute over the result emerged, a video made the rounds among Cameroonians giving the false impression that the German parliament had recognised Kamto's victory, in an apparent attempt to discredit the official tally.<sup>102</sup> Users have also circulated misleading images purporting to show human rights violations by security forces, which either did not happen or occurred outside Cameroon. The government pointed to such instances to claim that all such reports are false, thus attempting to cover up real abuses.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group observations of online media activity, July to October 2019.

<sup>100</sup> In May 2020, the government instructed the National Agency for Telecommunication, Information and Communication to run a campaign against misinformation in response to a spate of fabrications about the government's response to COVID-19. The agency sent out millions of SMS messages, placed notices in print media and identified many social media accounts impersonating government officials.

<sup>101</sup> The picture featured Kamto handing money to a person who, in the photograph, was unidentifiable. In fact, the person was the MRC party treasurer and not a rival politician being bought off.

<sup>102</sup> In the YouTube video in question, a German MP is voicing concerns about the security and political situation in Cameroon. The manipulated version features a fraudulent translation designed to mislead viewers as to who won the presidential election. In a related incident, a fake Twitter account falsely claimed that another opposition candidate, Cabral Libii, who came in third in the election with 6 per cent of the vote, had recognised Kamto's victory. "Présidentielle au Cameroun : comment Internet et les 'fake news' se sont invités dans la bataille", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 October 2018.

<sup>103</sup> "Non, ces photos ne montrent pas des soldats français arrêtés par l'armée camerounaise", AFP, 3 April 2019; "Cameroun : une enquête ouverte sur des images d'exécution de femmes et d'enfants", *Le Parisien*, 12 July 2018. In 2019, a video that went viral showed soldiers executing two women and two children. At first, the government's spokesperson dismissed it as fake news produced by the country's enemies. Later, under pressure, President Biya launched an inquiry, leading to the arrest of seven Cameroonian soldiers, some of whom were seen in the video. In other cases, users circulated footage purporting to show foreign troops intervening in Cameroon, which turned out to have been filmed elsewhere. "Non, cette vidéo ne montre pas l'armée française au Cameroun", AFP, 14 March 2019. Some of the misinformation and altered images, although not directly related to the Biya-Kamto dispute, are used by government critics to attack its credibility and incite the public against it. Other false reports, conversely, are used by pro-government activists to deflect opposition criticisms of government actions.

#### IV. Limits to Managing Ethnic Tensions, Inflammatory Content and Misinformation

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Cameroon's authorities can draw on a number of laws and institutions in efforts to soothe ethnic tensions and stymie hate speech.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, Facebook, Cameroon's most popular social media site, has adopted policies aimed at achieving the same. Thus far, however, these measures appear to fall short.

##### A. Government

Cameroon's government and President Biya have historically aimed to manage ethnic tensions by distributing important posts in the cabinet, public sector and parastatal bodies to people from all ethnic and regional backgrounds. This practice was codified in a 1982 law, updated in 1992, that lays out precise regional quotas (a person's regional origin is closely linked in Cameroon's legal system and popular perceptions to his or her ethnicity) for public-sector hiring.<sup>105</sup>

This approach suffers from important weaknesses, however. In practice, public-sector managers have a great deal of discretion in hiring, which they exercise with little oversight. Little stops them from ignoring the law, or even citing it as justification for hiring kin or co-ethnics.<sup>106</sup> As a result, many Cameroonians believe that the law serves to circumvent the principles of meritocracy in recruitment. Another problem is making a clear-cut determination about a person's region of origin: the law says to look at the traditional homeland of the father's ethnic group, not the birthplace or domicile of the person in question. This rule can make the determination of origins contentious in a country with high rates of internal migration.

In theory, the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism could help, but its impact has been minimal thus far. The government created the commission in January 2017 to address Anglophone grievances and pro-

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<sup>104</sup> According to Hootsuite and We Are Social, there are 7.8 million internet users in Cameroon as of January 2020. The most used social media website is Facebook, with 3.6 million users. Twitter has fewer than 150,000 users in Cameroon.

<sup>105</sup> Under a regional balance policy fixed by presidential decree since 1982, Cameroon recruits for its civil service through regional quotas. These quotas are based on the origin of the candidate's parents. Ministerial decision 0015/MINFOPRA/CAB of August 1992 set the figures as: Far North 18 per cent, Centre 15 per cent, West 13 per cent, Littoral 12 per cent, North West 12 per cent, South West 8 per cent, North 7 per cent, Adamawa 5 per cent, East 4 per cent, South 4 per cent and former soldiers 2 per cent. If extra places remain unclaimed, they are allocated among four pools: the northern regions, the Centre-South-East, the Littoral-West and the Anglophone regions. In September 2020, critics accused the government of tribalism after judging that ENAM, an elite school of administration and magistracy, had admitted an unfairly high number of candidates from the Centre and South regions at the expense of applicants from the three northern and the two Anglophone regions.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church leader, politicians, MP, Douala and Yaoundé, September-November 2019. As an example, in February 2017, a minister caused controversy by publishing a list of recruits for a project where it appeared that the majority of names were of his ethnic group. He explained that he had considered candidate proximity to the Centre and South regions, where the bulk of the project was earmarked. But Cameroonians accused him of ethnic discrimination, nonetheless.

mote linguistic and cultural diversity. But its powers are merely consultative. Biya drew the commission's fifteen appointed members from the ranks of civil society as well as former government ministers and its current head, former Prime Minister Mafani Musonge, reports directly to the president. While its activities have so far mostly related to the Anglophone crisis, in August 2019 it held a seminar on the risks of ethnic hate speech. It has also set up a mechanism for reporting such speech on its website.<sup>107</sup> Overall, however, it has made little progress in addressing ethnic intolerance nationwide.<sup>108</sup>

When it comes to regulating media, it is unclear whether Cameroon's government – whose attitude toward journalists is often repressive – can both protect the right to free speech and check the rise of inflammatory online content.<sup>109</sup> The government recognises that social media can be destabilising. As far back as 10 November 2016, the National Assembly speaker and leading ruling-party figure Cavayé Djibril, expressed what he said was the government position that social media was becoming a new form of "terrorism".<sup>110</sup> Yet the government tends to move only against media that it sees as a threat to its own position, as opposed to looking at the entire industry as a space requiring regulation. The May 2019 arrest of a blogger known for sharing material critical of the government is just one of many cases in point. The blogger remains in pre-trial detention on criminal defamation charges.<sup>111</sup>

The government has also regulated the use of social media by its own employees, particularly those leaking sensitive information. On 28 March 2018, then-Prime Minister Philemon Yang issued a circular in which he denounced officials who had used social media to reveal confidential documents following a series of leaks, including classified police bans on senior state officials leaving the country. Three months later, the government ordered all gendarmes to quit social media platforms, concerned that sensitive security information could be made public.<sup>112</sup> Thereafter, the secretary of state for the National Gendarmerie required gendarmes to obtain authorisation to

<sup>107</sup> The commission's website is [www.cnpbm.cm](http://www.cnpbm.cm).

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official and civil society leader, Yaoundé, September 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Reporters Without Borders ranked Cameroon 134th of 180 countries in its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, marking a loss of three places from 2019.

<sup>110</sup> Cavayé Djibril, National Assembly opening speech, 10 November 2016.

<sup>111</sup> "Continued Detention of Cameroonian Journalist an Affront to Freedom of Expression", PEN International, 19 November 2019. Blogger Paul Chouta has been in pre-trial detention for over eight months. He was arrested after a pro-government French-Cameroonian author filed a criminal libel complaint against him for posting a video of her arguing in public with another person on his popular Facebook page *Le TGV de l'Info*. Other cases include that of Martinez Zogo, a journalist at Yaounde-based *Amplitude FM*, who was jailed in January 2020 for defamation-related charges that included cyber-criminality and blackmail following a complaint by a government official's spouse. He was released two months later. "Le journaliste camerounais Martinez Zogo emprisonné depuis Janvier pour diffamation", Committee to Protect Journalists, 24 February 2020. In another case, on 23 October 2018 authorities arrested journalist Michel Tong for disseminating news on violence in the Anglophone regions, accusing him of supporting terrorism. They released him in December of that year. "Cameroon: Release Human Rights Defender Michel Biem Tong," Frontline Defenders, 27 November 2018.

<sup>112</sup> "Cameroun : L'usage des réseaux sociaux par les gendarmes désormais soumis à l'autorisation de la hiérarchie", *Digital Business Africa*, 23 June 2018; "Utilisation des réseaux sociaux : le patron de la gendarmerie recadre ses troupes", *Journal du Cameroun*, 17 October 2019.

open a social media account and asked them to delete all forums in which they were acting as moderators or administrators. The secretary of state was reportedly worried that military personnel were using social media to breach the requirement that they keep political opinions or work-related information to themselves.<sup>113</sup>

Restrictions of this nature may be justified to ensure the security of government business, but in a country where human rights abuses are widespread, there is a risk that they serve to silence whistleblowers. Some of the information that police officers and gendarmes might leak is evidence of human rights violations, perhaps in the form of audio or video recordings.<sup>114</sup>

When the government has taken measures to counter misinformation, its attempts have either proved ineffective or been politically motivated. In 2016, it set up a fact-checking website for Cameroon, operated by a strategic communications firm the government also contracts to promote sympathetic narratives.<sup>115</sup> Since January 2017, the government has also sent text messages to citizens warning that those who spread misinformation will be prosecuted under the country's cyber-crime laws.<sup>116</sup> It is unlikely that this measure will stem the problem, however, and many Cameroonians doubt that it will be applied in a politically neutral fashion.<sup>117</sup>

In the meantime, the government passed a bill in December 2019 criminalising "contempt of tribe", although again it is unclear how much it will help curb ethnic tensions.<sup>118</sup> The law punishes inflammatory language aimed at ethnic groups with a prison term of up to two years and a fine of three million francs (\$5,000), which can reach twenty million francs (\$35,000) if the rhetoric appears in the press or social media. It is too early to know if the government will apply the new law neutrally, so as to discourage all politically driven hate speech, or whether it will target individuals it considers threatening. Nor is it clear whether the law, whose terms are far from clear-cut, will enable the authorities to police the vast online space, assuming they are willing to do so. Applying it to thousands of social media posts would present a significant challenge for a government with low capacity for regulating social media.<sup>119</sup>

Cameroon's National Communication Council (NCC) could help address hate speech, but it is hobbled by limited operational capacity and public mistrust. The body was created in the early 1990s, partly to curtail inflammatory discourse as the country embraced free speech with the return to multi-party politics. In January 2012, the government expanded its remit to encompass internet communication. Its

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<sup>113</sup> "Cameroun : L'usage des réseaux sociaux par les gendarmes désormais soumis à l'autorisation de la hiérarchie", op. cit.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> In March 2020, the website stopblablacam.com moved from basic fact checking of news spreading on the internet to include reporting its own original news items. The site is run by Stratline, a strategic communications firm hired by the government.

<sup>116</sup> "Cameroun : MTN s'explique sur la diffusion des SMS du Minpostel", Digital Business Africa, 17 January 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists, Yaoundé, June-October 2019.

<sup>118</sup> "Hate speech linked to tribalism is now punishable by the Cameroon Penal Code", *Journal du Cameroun*, 27 December 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Cameroon was ranked 99th of 100 on DiGix 2018, a composite index calculated from three factors that include regulation or institutional environment and measures countries' levels of digitisation. "Which countries are the most digitally advanced?", BBVA, 9 April 2019.

activities are limited to raising awareness among journalists, however, and it would likely struggle to tackle the sheer volume of content online.<sup>120</sup>

Public opinion about the NCC is mixed. Its members include long-time government critics and independent-minded individuals, and, to its credit, it has tried to remain free of political interference, sanctioning journalists mostly when they publish unsubstantiated and damaging details about people's private lives.<sup>121</sup> Journalists' unions, however, question the NCC's independence and consider its sanctions against independent media excessive.<sup>122</sup> While trying to stay autonomous, the commission has come under increasing pressure to toe the government line. For example, when it penalised pro-government media for inflammatory content related to the Anglophone crisis, powerful government supporters took the NCC to court.<sup>123</sup>

Another body involved in policing Cameroon's cyberspace is the National Agency for Telecommunication, Information and Communication (ANTIC). It is the country's internet security watchdog, looking out for elements of cyber-crime including false identity, data safety, impersonation, fraud, fake domain names and online scams. Part of its mandate is to tackle fake internet news, including by raising public awareness of cyber-crime laws. Despite its broad remit, Crisis Group's observations suggest that the body also struggles to police the thousands of voices on social media.

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<sup>120</sup> Apart from regulating media, the NCC also runs training sessions for journalists to improve their understanding of the law. "Communication en temps de crise : le recadrage du CNC", *Cameroon Tribune*, 17 March 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists, Yaoundé and Douala, June to October 2019. The NCC has sanctioned journalists for biased reporting with warnings or suspensions from practice for between one and six months. In many of the NCC's cases, individuals lodge complaints against journalists. Many complaints follow media reports that make insinuations of sexual or financial misconduct that the journalist cannot back up. Journalists argue that they have an obligation to protect their sources. There is deep disagreement over what is in the public interest, worsened by Cameroon's lack of a freedom of information law that could oblige authorities to provide information on management of public affairs.

<sup>122</sup> See "National Communication Council slams new sanctions on media organs", *Cameroon Tribune*, 20 December 2017; "Cameroon council silences journalists, media outlets", VOA, 24 September 2017. In 2018, the head of the journalists' union asked members to disregard an NCC request for media to suspend political reporting. The union saw the NCC's request as a government ploy to stifle coverage of the Anglophone crisis. See also "Suspension des programmes à caractère politique : le Syndicat national des journalistes du Cameroun demande aux médias et aux journalistes de désobéir au Conseil national de la communication", Cameroon-Info.Net, 11 March 2018; "Cameroun : Peter Essoka s'attaque à Denis Nkwebo et interdit à la presse de commenter le verdict de l'affaire Ahmed Abba", *Le Bled Parle*, 29 April 2017. Journalists have conveyed some of their criticisms at the NCC training sessions. At one session, Essoka called on them to "demonstrate patriotic responsibility in their work. Many journalists said their patriotism was not in question but that the government needed to establish access to official information". "Communication en temps de crise : le recadrage du CNC", op. cit.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, media regulators and other media stakeholders, Yaoundé, June 2019. In December 2018, the NCC suspended a Yaoundé-based television journalist working for a pro-government media organ for inciting ethnic hatred and warned the channel's owner not to allow such material on his broadcasts. As a result, the channel's owner dragged the NCC head into court. The court handed him a six-month suspended sentence for abuse of office. "Cameroun : l'intégralité des sanctions prises par le Conseil national de la communication", *Journal du Cameroun*, 20 December 2018; "Cameroun : Peter Essoka condamné à 6 mois de prison avec sursis", *Actu Cameroun*, 21 September 2018.

## B. Facebook

Social media companies are under pressure to curtail the surges in misinformation, inflammatory language and hate speech in Cameroon, with Facebook, the country's most popular social media platform, facing particular scrutiny from both the government and ordinary users. Free speech advocates say the increasing use of Facebook has promoted open debate and boosted the profile of political commentators who are invisible in traditional media.<sup>124</sup> Yet even some Facebook officials worry that inflammatory language in Cameroon carried on the platform, combined with controversy in many countries over the company's alleged tolerance of misinformation and hate speech, may significantly damage its reputation.<sup>125</sup>

Facebook has expressed its concern to Crisis Group about the situation in Cameroon, where it says it strives to uphold freedom of expression in an environment hostile to journalists and social media users.<sup>126</sup> It has, for example, ensured that the page of a popular blogger in detention for alleged libel has remained active. The company uses a range of policies to protect high-risk users.<sup>127</sup> Further, it submits itself to biennial assessments of its performance in upholding civil and political rights and works with a network of trusted partners who provide independent analysis of local trends which informs its judgment of user risk, of which Crisis Group is one, as described in the introduction above.

The company recognises that some types of content, such as hate speech, can lead to imminent, offline harm. Facebook officials say the company is increasing its capacity to research local context and to identify specific harmful material, including tripling the size of its teams working on safety and security worldwide.<sup>128</sup> It uses artificial intelligence to proactively detect hate speech in 45 languages, which include French and English, Cameroon's official languages. But with so many local dialects of both languages in use, this artificial intelligence system likely struggles to catch all the incitement. The company therefore further relies on users and a volunteer network to report inflammatory content and fake accounts. It has also carried some online campaigns to promote its online rules (commonly known as its community standards) targeting Cameroonian users. It uses third-party fact-checking organisations in the country to control the spread of misinformation.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists and internet campaigners, Yaoundé, February 2020.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Facebook officials, by telephone and correspondence, throughout 2020. See "Facebook's employees blast Zuckerberg's hands-off response to Trump posts as protests grip nation", *Washington Post*, 2 June 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Facebook officials, October 2020.

<sup>127</sup> Paul Chouta's page, *Le TGV de l'Info*, remains active on the platform despite the owner being in detention. Facebook uses a system of security check-ups, provides support for hacked accounts and recommends two-factor authentication for high-risk users. It also provides support through a partnership with Access Now, a program that gives direct technical assistance to civil society, media, bloggers and human rights defenders, even securing online accounts in case of detention. It is not clear how many of these tools the company has used in Cameroon.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Facebook officials, by telephone and correspondence, February and October 2020.

<sup>129</sup> In Cameroon, Facebook uses AFP and PesaCheck to review and rate potentially false content, which the company then labels with a warning on its platform. It has also engaged with the public health ministry to promote authentic websites for COVID-19 pandemic information.

Apart from in-platform work to moderate content, Facebook has physically reached out to Cameroonians. Company representatives visited the country in August 2018 and August 2019 to train government and civil society actors in its community standards and explain how the company can expunge pages and profiles promoting inflammatory content and misinformation.<sup>130</sup>

Nonetheless, Facebook has no quick fixes, as few Cameroonian citizens or government departments report abuse or inflammatory language, often because they are not aware that the company can take corrective action.<sup>131</sup> Facebook points to banning some users but has no country-specific breakdown it could share with Crisis Group. Observation of Facebook posts, limited to public rather than private posts, indicates that inflammatory content remains widespread.<sup>132</sup>

There are several reasons for this limited impact. First, without significant evidence of the use of artificial intelligence bots or mass influencers in Cameroon's online political debate, filtering out toxic material depends largely on identification of malevolent content, case by case, for which Facebook lacks dedicated Cameroon operations as it has chosen to boost global thematic teams rather than invest in country-specific understanding.<sup>133</sup> The part-time use of voluntary groups seems unlikely to compensate for this lack of internal capacity.<sup>134</sup> Secondly, Facebook's algorithms used to monitor hate speech are not suited to identifying idiomatic expressions, often in a mix of English and French, which are specific to Cameroon.<sup>135</sup>

Even more worrying, it appears that, at least until recently, the company's algorithms for determining what material is given prominence in users' newsfeeds may have given undue weight to incendiary content. The platform tends to spread content that is widely viewed, and users are more likely to engage with provocative material, whether they agree with it or not.<sup>136</sup> The impact of Facebook's new algorithm,

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<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, internet campaigner, Douala, February 2020.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, internet stakeholders, Yaoundé and Douala, February 2020; Facebook officials, by telephone, February and October 2020. Facebook reports having tripled the size of its in-house teams working on safety and security since 2016, removing 22 million pieces of hate speech between April and June 2020, detecting over 94 per cent of them before anyone reported them to the company. Also, it has 15,000 people enforcing adherence to community standards. Impressive though these figures may be, they relate to the global situation rather than to any particular country.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group observation of Cameroon-related posts, 2019 and 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Facebook officials, February and October 2020.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Facebook officials, October 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Facebook officials, journalists and internet professionals, Yaoundé and Douala, February 2020.

<sup>135</sup> Cameroon's two official languages are English and French. Each of its over 250 ethnic groups has its own native language. In addition, the use of pidgin English is widespread in the country. The blend of English, French, West African pidgin and local languages results in expressions specific to Cameroon and is sometimes known as Camfranglais. It seems far-fetched to expect filters designed for the world's main official languages to interpret the nuances of informal communication in Cameroon.

<sup>136</sup> "Facebook executives shut down efforts to make the site less divisive", *Wall Street Journal*, 26 May 2020; Martin Ndlela, "Social Media Algorithms, Bots and Elections in Africa", in Martin Ndlela and Winston Mano (eds.), *Social Media and Elections in Africa*, vol. 1 (New York, 2020); and Kjerstin Thorson, et al., "Algorithmic Inference, Political Interest and Exposure to News and Politics on Facebook", *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 22 (2019). Facebook communi-

which is designed to address this problem, is not yet apparent. Nor are the changes themselves well understood.<sup>137</sup> Finally, Facebook's in-person engagement with Cameroonians seems limited. Company representatives' visits in 2018 and 2019 were short and did not include meetings with the political opposition, a key stakeholder in the issues that need addressing.<sup>138</sup>

Welcome attempts by Facebook to work with ANTIC to verify Cameroon government pages as part of its efforts to certify bona fide sources of information do not seem to be yielding much change in behaviour online.<sup>139</sup> Apart from the presidency and the communication ministry, which were early adopters, the company verified over a dozen government pages in 2020, but a significant gap remains. The justice ministry, whose head in October 2017 called on the country's ten regional judiciaries to crack down on criminal acts on social media, especially anonymous accounts, is itself apparently not verified on Facebook but has two pages with its name.<sup>140</sup> The lack of certification leaves internet users vulnerable to consuming news from fake pages and profiles purporting to be government pages.

As a result, among both government and opposition users, there is mistrust of the company, despite the range of tools it deploys, and both sides often see it as working against their respective interests. Government officials complain that Facebook is biased against the authorities in its choice of posts to take down or not take down, despite complaints, although there is little evidence of the company removing pro-government posts even if inflammatory.<sup>141</sup> National prosecutors make scant use of contacts with Facebook to request information and metadata that could be used to

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cated to Crisis Group that it is working on limiting mass circulation of potentially false material on both its Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. Crisis Group telephone interview, Facebook officials, October 2020. It should be noted that the research on this issue remains largely focused on a limited number of Western countries and the impact such algorithms have had in countries like Cameroon is not yet clear.

<sup>137</sup> "One year in, Facebook's big algorithm change has spurred an angry, Fox News-dominated – and very engaged! – news feed", Neiman Lab, 15 March 2019.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Facebook officials, February and October 2020. In addition to the visits, Facebook ran media literacy campaigns via Africa Check, targeting Cameroon prior to local elections in February and July 2020 to teach users how to spot misinformation.

<sup>139</sup> ANTIC was designated by the government of Cameroon to act as focal point for gathering and channelling information on page verification requests for government departments and ministers to Facebook.

<sup>140</sup> The justice minister's letter, dated 21 October 2017, asked prosecutors to fight "the impunity of criminal acts on social media". He identified threats, intimidation, insults and calls for violence as some of those acts. Two pages purporting to be official Cameroonian justice ministry pages ([www.facebook.com/MinjusticeCM](http://www.facebook.com/MinjusticeCM) and [www.facebook.com/minjusticecam](http://www.facebook.com/minjusticecam)) were not verified as of 28 October 2020. It remains unclear if either is actually genuine. Other apparently bona fide government pages like that of the police are unverified (as of 28 October 2020), while others lack fresh content. But the pages of the navy and the ministries of commerce, external relations, youth affairs and civic education are verified and active.

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group observation of activity on Facebook, 2019 and 2020. Some officials note that while Facebook receives links flagged by ANTIC as misinformation, the company does not take instruction from the agency as to which posts to pull down. During the August 2018 visit, government officials told Facebook representatives their online platform was being used to mislead youths, spread misinformation and hate speech. Crisis Group interviews, internet company officials, Yaoundé and Douala, February 2020; government official, Yaoundé, February 2020.

prosecute bona fide cases of hate speech under existing laws.<sup>142</sup> In contrast, many Cameroonian internet users complain that Facebook has taken down posts critical of the government, although here the company could be responding to pro-government activists' complaints.<sup>143</sup> In any case, government critics see little company action when they flag posts that they judge inflammatory.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Facebook data shows that between 2016 and 2019, Cameroon made only four such requests, all of which were related to legal processes, as opposed to requests for evidence. "Government Requests for User Data", Facebook, May 2020. Facebook provides support to ANTIC on cases of misrepresentation of government officials, institutions and agencies. ANTIC also has access to a special channel through which it can quickly escalate user complaints and report content that may violate Facebook community standards. It is worth noting that it is relatively new in Cameroon (passed in December 2019). But since the law against "contempt of tribe" came into effect in December 2019, the government has barely used Facebook to collect evidence for prosecution despite permissive hate speech posts on the platform.

<sup>143</sup> Facebook removes content which violates its policies, notifies users on the reason for removing their post and warns the person who posted it. The company can temporarily block or delete accounts for repeated violations. Crisis Group interviews, Facebook officials, October 2020.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Facebook users, Yaoundé and Douala, February 2020.

## V. Defusing Tensions

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Cameroon's mounting political and ethnic strains reflect a longstanding struggle between a ruling party that, although not itself always united, is seeking to keep the post-Biya transition in-house, and outside challengers, of whom Maurice Kamto is most prominent at present. The 2018 election dispute and the country's compromised electoral system have severely exacerbated those tensions, which in turn play out in disputes over the Anglophone conflict and the government's handling of COVID-19. Both the political crisis and resulting ethnic tensions are set to sharpen as speculation mounts over who might eventually succeed Biya. Both government and opposition politicians are likely to look to their ethnic bases when mobilising support for succession bids.<sup>145</sup>

If they are intent on curbing tensions – a big if, at this time – government and opposition politicians will need to look to ways of working together to address issues relating to the flawed 2018 election and reduce animosity among ethnic groups. The ruling party's crushing victory at the February 2020 polls, which has emptied Cameroon's institutions of critical voices, means that, if they indeed want to seek consensus and avoid unrest, ruling party politicians will need to engage in direct talks with their rivals outside parliament. Conversely, if Biya's party ignores opposing points of view, especially on electoral reforms, many Cameroonians will likely turn to protest, which the security forces will probably meet with lethal force, as in the past.<sup>146</sup> The escalation in Anglophone areas following the repression of demonstrations in Bamenda and Buea in 2016, which sparked the prolonged crisis there, is a stark reminder of what can happen when political tensions get out of hand.

In the meantime, the government, political parties and social media companies should take steps to contain hate speech. Social media companies, particularly Facebook, ought to take greater responsibility for curbing inflammatory online content and devote sufficient resources to filtering out toxic material, as well as more actively encourage Cameroonian politicians to adopt community standards. All political parties, the government and civil society need to promote moderation and a more ethical use of their platforms in order to stop the entrenchment of hate speech, which could push the country toward ethnic competition that risks turning violent.

### A. *Electoral Reform to Build Political Consensus*

This latest episode of political tensions in Cameroon stems in large part from the disputed 2018 presidential election. Independent observers and participants in Cameroon's recent elections agree to varying degrees that the electoral system needs to be more transparent and credible.<sup>147</sup> The government taking measures to address these problems could have two notable benefits. First, it would signal good faith and so dampen antagonism between it and the opposition, increasing the chances of reach-

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<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interview, former minister, Yaoundé, January 2020.

<sup>146</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon: The Dangers of a Fracturing Regime*, op. cit.

<sup>147</sup> "Preliminary Statement: African Union Election Observation Mission to the 9th February 2020 Legislative and Municipal Elections in the Republic of Cameroon", press release, 11 February 2020; "African Union Election Observation Mission to the 7 October Presidential Election in the Republic of Cameroon – Preliminary Statement", 9 October 2018.

ing consensus on how to handle issues such as COVID-19, and most importantly, the Anglophone conflict. Secondly, agreeing upon broad principles now, thereby allowing Elections Cameroon time to apply lessons it has identified from previous polls before the next electoral cycle, could lay the groundwork for better elections later and ensure opposition buy-in. Many in the ruling party will resist such moves as counter to their perceived interest in holding on to power. But others will likely understand that Cameroon's stability ultimately depends on advancing on such critical issues in a consensual manner.

In this vein, the government should open a dialogue with the opposition – outside parliament, given the ruling party's capture of the institution – to seek agreement on necessary reforms, drawing on lessons from past elections, especially those of 2018 and 2020. Talks should be private to ensure frankness even as their agenda ought to be public to provide for a degree of transparency. They could be facilitated or mediated by an ad hoc panel drawn from religious bodies, civil society and the ranks of former civil servants and Cameroonian diplomats or those working in international organisations, as well as members of Elections Cameroon.

International actors can play their part. While they should stay in the background, as the government would react poorly to perceived attempts to internationalise election reform, diplomats in Yaoundé could nevertheless nudge the parties toward talks and impress upon them a sense of urgency. Pressure, which should take the form of private conversations among partners, including the U.S., the African Union, European countries – especially France which retains strong influence in Cameroon – and senior government figures in Yaoundé, could help tip the balance in the direction of talks, and eventually, reform.

Reforms optimally would reflect consensus and result from discussions between the two sides, though there are three obvious areas for change. First, Elections Cameroon could assume responsibility for more of the electoral process. Set up in 2006 to be independent, Elections Cameroon has made improvements by computerising the voter register and, in most instances, ensuring that ballots are delivered on time to polling stations, notwithstanding other flaws with recent polls. But the government manages the accreditation of domestic observers through its ministry of territorial administration, and of foreign observers through that same ministry and the foreign affairs ministry. The government arguably should have a role in accrediting foreign observers, but in the past, it has unfairly shut out their potential domestic counterparts. The authorities could adopt a two-step system wherein Elections Cameroon would accredit national observers and the government or other parties could challenge its decisions. A similar system is already in place for vetting candidates for elective office.

Secondly, the government should adopt the use of a single ballot, one of the recommendations Elections Cameroon discussed during its own review of the 2018 vote.<sup>148</sup> As explained above, Cameroon's multiple ballot system for presidential, legislative and local elections, whereby voters receive separate slips of paper for each candidate from which they select one, is open to abuse. A single ballot system, in which the names of all candidates would be printed on the same sheet of paper, would make it much

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<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Elections Cameroon staff, Yaoundé, November 2019.

harder for a third party to know after the fact for whom someone has voted, thereby curtailing opportunities for vote buying, intimidation and influence peddling.<sup>149</sup> It would avoid the widespread instances in which opposition candidate ballots are in short supply. It would also reduce the amount of paper that needs transporting to and from polling stations and speed up the voting process.

It seems unlikely, despite what some government supporters argue, that voters would be confused by a single ballot. The current system, involving multiple bits of paper, already has drawbacks and requires poll workers to help voters in the polling stations, and candidates would have the opportunity during campaigns to educate the electorate on a new system using mock ballots.<sup>150</sup> The electorate likely would be able to deal with such a basic issue as a single ballot, which is already widely employed across Africa (indeed, Cameroon's system is a continental anomaly). Moreover, if Cameroon adopts the change soon, electoral officials would have several years to prepare voters before the next election.

Finally, the government should consider allowing more rigorous investigations of election irregularities. At present, the law reserves final proclamation of results in presidential and legislative elections not to Elections Cameroon but to the Constitutional Council. It relies for its information on the National Vote Counting Commission, over which a council member presides. But neither the council nor the commission, both of which are based in the capital, far removed from voting areas, is able to determine if voting was fraudulent or not, underlining the need for verification at the source and not in Yaoundé.<sup>151</sup> This system has led to a loss of confidence in elections' integrity among the opposition as well as ordinary Cameroonians.

The problem could be addressed in one of two ways or a combination of both. The government could pass legislation mandating the Constitutional Council or the Vote Counting Commission, or both in tandem, to work with local high courts to address voting irregularities close to the places where they occur, by hearing from witnesses and reviewing evidence in rapidly held hearings close to where problems have occurred. They could thereby tally verified votes within three days of voting, as is the case with municipal elections. The Constitutional Council would then have twelve of its allocated fifteen days to compile verified results. Cameroon might also consider allowing bailiffs, who are sworn independent professionals, working at the local level, to collect evidence of irregularities and to work on Sunday, the country's usual election day, for which they now require specific authorisation. The bailiffs' reports could then assist both local courts and the council in determining the integrity of elections where there are disputes.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Observers have recorded cases in Cameroon of voters slotting one sheet into the ballot and taking out the other sheets to give to party officials in exchange for money, or under duress, with the missing ballot serving as proof of whom they voted for.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, Yaoundé, November 2019.

<sup>151</sup> A Constitutional Council member chairs the National Vote Counting Commission, a body which includes officials from Elections Cameroon and the ministry of territorial administration, as well as judges appointed by the Supreme Court and representatives of political parties. The commission compiles results transmitted by divisional vote counting commissions to produce a tally, which the council then proclaims as the final result, after hearing any legal challenges within fifteen days.

<sup>152</sup> Cameroon traditionally holds its elections on Sundays, but the law prohibits bailiffs from working on Sunday, except with prior written authorisation from a judge. This rule deprives politicians

## B. *Measures to Avoid Communal Violence*

Cameroon's ethic of *vivre ensemble* ("living together", an expression often used to indicate that multiculturalism is one of the country's highest ideals) is under growing strain. Checking rising communal antagonism will require political consensus and fairer, more transparent application of existing laws. Action in two areas in particular could lower the temperature: boosting the capacity of the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism and clarifying the enforcement of recent laws against hate speech, including ethnic slurs. Social media companies, meanwhile, should devote more resources to identifying problematic content, better explain decisions to remove inflammatory posts and users, and verify that the webpages of more people and organisations in Cameroon are genuine.

### 1. Calming ethnic tensions

Cameroon has a number of laws aimed at redressing ethnic discrimination, as well as the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. As it stands, however, neither the legal arsenal nor the commission is equal to the task.

The existing legal framework is insufficient. It includes the 1992 amended law governing the ethno-regional quota system in public employment, but as described above, it is often abused and not enforced by legal sanction. Another 2016 law criminalises discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, gender or medical status, but not ethnic identity.<sup>153</sup> The 2019 law prohibiting "contempt of tribe" targets online hate speech but not ethnic discrimination in employment practices.<sup>154</sup>

Parliament could pass new or revise existing legislation to outlaw ethnic discrimination, allowing watchdogs to take firmer action against practices favouring one group over another, notably in public-sector employment. Such action would help dispel public perceptions of bias on the part of powerful government supporters advancing their parochial ethnic interests. A new or revised law could also improve the application of the regional quota system by enforcing more transparency.

Reinforcing the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism could also help. On paper, the body has promise for redressing discrimination. But at present it is purely consultative, and its autonomy is compromised insofar as it reports only to the head of state. The government and legislators should grant it expanded, ombudsman-type powers, through a new or amended law revising its mandate.

An expanded mandate should allow the commission to monitor policies geared toward achieving regional balance in public appointments, such as civil service quotas. It should also be able to produce recommendations concerning how such policies are applied and seek judicial redress on victims' behalf, thus circumventing the high political and administrative hurdles as well as financial costs of litigation for ordinary citizens. While ethnic quotas are unlikely to solve antagonisms in themselves, they

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of a vital tool for collecting evidence of electoral fraud and other irregularities, which impedes due consideration of appeals.

<sup>153</sup> Article 242 of Cameroon's penal code of 12 July 2016 on discrimination.

<sup>154</sup> Article 241 of Cameroon's penal code of 12 July 2016 on contempt of race and religion, amended in December 2019 to include these offences committed through social media.

are part of Cameroon's legal system and go at least some way toward addressing the perception of imbalance in the distribution of government posts. They should at least apply fairly and transparently. The government should fund the commission so it can hire new staff, expand its monitoring and set up offices outside the capital. It should allow the body to present its work to the public and parliament, even if debate may be limited because the CPDM now dominates the assembly.

While some in the ruling party are likely to regard such changes warily, they would present advantages for President Biya. He should have an interest in making reform part of his legacy, given his stated concern that public institutions reflect the country's diversity.<sup>155</sup> The authorities already have a policy of promoting *vivre ensemble*, intended to recognise ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences and to ensure that various groups are represented in public life. Cameroon's political elites should honour it.

## 2. Doing more to reduce inflammatory online content and misinformation

Given today's political frictions, coupled with the explosion of internet use in Cameroon, it is no surprise that ethnic tensions born of the political crisis have both led to and been fuelled by a spike in hate speech and damaging misinformation online. Curbing such behaviour will not on its own resolve Cameroon's ethno-political tensions, but it can help mitigate risks of violence.

One danger is that of the government politicising measures aimed at curbing hate speech. Cameroon's regulatory bodies are under-resourced, but were they to acquire additional capacity, they could come under pressure to apply restrictions on social media content in partisan ways, namely by targeting government opponents. Political tensions could heighten further as a result.

In this light, Facebook itself should act on posts flagged by users and take down those that stoke hatred and violence. Policies to reduce inflammatory content and misinformation have special relevance for the Silicon Valley giant, given its large number of users in Cameroon, which is set to grow substantially as a younger tech-savvy generation emerges and politicians continue to use the medium to push their messages.<sup>156</sup> The company can take a number of steps on its own initiative.

First, it should improve its own capacity – including hiring content moderators familiar with Cameroon – to evaluate inflammatory or fake content that risks provoking ethnic tensions and violence, and to remove such content from its platform. Given the particularities of Cameroonian hate speech, Facebook should increase its monitoring of French-language posts in the country and develop its understanding of linguistic nuances.

At the same time, it should work with other actors in Cameroon that can help identify and curb offensive content. It should boost its outreach to politicians across

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<sup>155</sup> In a speech delivered at the combined military academy's graduation ceremony in Yaoundé on 18 January 2019, President Biya declared that the cultural, linguistic and sociological diversity of Cameroon, far from being a flaw, is in fact one of the country's most precious gifts. The graduating class was aptly named "Unity and Diversity", with the president praising the fact that the newly minted officers had come from every region of the country.

<sup>156</sup> Over 70 per cent of Facebook users in Cameroon are between 18 and 34 years of age. See "Le taux de pénétration de l'internet au Cameroun atteint 30% en 2020, grâce à l'arrivée de 570 000 nouveaux internautes", *op. cit.*

the spectrum and push them to notify the company of inflammatory speech, while also helping them implement guidelines for social media use by their supporters and verify bona fide content in order to differentiate it from misinformation. Facebook should increase its verification of pages of key institutions and influencers across the spectrum to reduce anonymity. It should also forge partnerships with Cameroonian civil society, NGOs and academics to solicit independent views as to whether particular content constitutes hate speech (though having a volunteer network should not free the company from developing its own resources dedicated to content moderation). Strengthening such relationships would also allow the company to better explain the procedures and criteria behind its decisions to remove inflammatory posts and users.

As for the government and political parties, they should also take responsibility for ensuring that their supporters stay clear of hate speech. They should do so in recognition that they are dealing with an increasingly digitally savvy electorate, but also to reclaim space lost to inflammatory online activists, including by regular posting of accurate information. Despite Cameroonians' scepticism vis-à-vis political elites, the ruling and main opposition parties command sufficient followings to have an impact if they call for more ethical use of social media.

They should also promote their views through their own dedicated webpages, which they should ask social media companies to certify. Ideally, all government departments, public institutions and political parties should be producing content in the country's two official languages of English and French on pages and profiles certified by Facebook and Twitter.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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Political actors in Cameroon are driving up ethnic tension at a time of national crisis marked by the conflict in the Anglophone regions, deteriorating security elsewhere and a COVID-19 crisis that is throwing ever more of the country's youth out of work.<sup>157</sup> Intercommunal frictions are not a new phenomenon, but many citizens worry that the current wave has lasted over two years and that the animosity between Kamto and Biya will continue to poison ethnic relations across the country to an unprecedented degree. The government can avoid a slide in Cameroon's fortunes and rising instability by reforming its electoral system as a matter of priority and by strengthening institutional bodies and laws to combat ethnic discrimination. Social media companies, notably Facebook, have a major role to play in tamping down tensions, by increasing their own capacity to filter out toxic content and ensuring that they do not themselves become catalysts of social upheaval and bloodshed.

**Yaoundé/Nairobi/Brussels, 3 December 2020**

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<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interviews, politicians, Yaoundé and Douala, August 2019.

Appendix A: Map of Cameroon



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Principality of Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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**December 2020**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2017

### Special Reports and Briefings

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

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*A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation*, Africa Report N°279, 25 June 2019.

*The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, Africa Report N°286, 31 January 2020.

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*Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures*, Africa Report N°246, 8 March 2017 (also available in French).

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*Cameroon's Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°263, 14 August 2018 (also available in French).

*Helping the Burundian People Cope with the Economic Crisis*, Africa Report N°264, 31 August 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon: Divisions Widen Ahead of Presidential Vote*, Africa Briefing N°142, 3 October 2018 (also available in French).

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*Running Out of Options in Burundi*, Africa Report N°278, 20 June 2019 (also available in French).

*A New Approach for the UN to Stabilise the DR Congo*, Africa Briefing N°148, 4 December 2019.

*Avoiding the Resurgence of Inter-communal Violence in Eastern Chad*, Africa Report N°284, 30 December 2019 (also available in French).

*Averting Proxy Wars in the Eastern DdR Congo and Great Lakes*, Africa Briefing N°150, 23 January 2020 (also available in French).

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*Zimbabwe's "Military-assisted Transition" and Prospects for Recovery*, Africa Briefing N°134, 20 December 2017.

*Four Conflict Prevention Opportunities for South Africa's Foreign Policy*, Africa Briefing N°152, 27 March 2020.

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*All That Glitters is Not Gold: Turmoil in Zimbabwe's Mining Sector*, Africa Report N°294, 24 November 2020.

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*Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°244, 23 February 2017.

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*Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Six States to Watch*, Africa Report N°268, 21 December 2018.

*Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, Africa Report N°273, 16 May 2019.

*Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°275, 21 May 2019.

*Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*, Africa Report N°276 (also available in French), 28 May 2019.

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