



A report on **secessionist movements** in Africa and human rights violations

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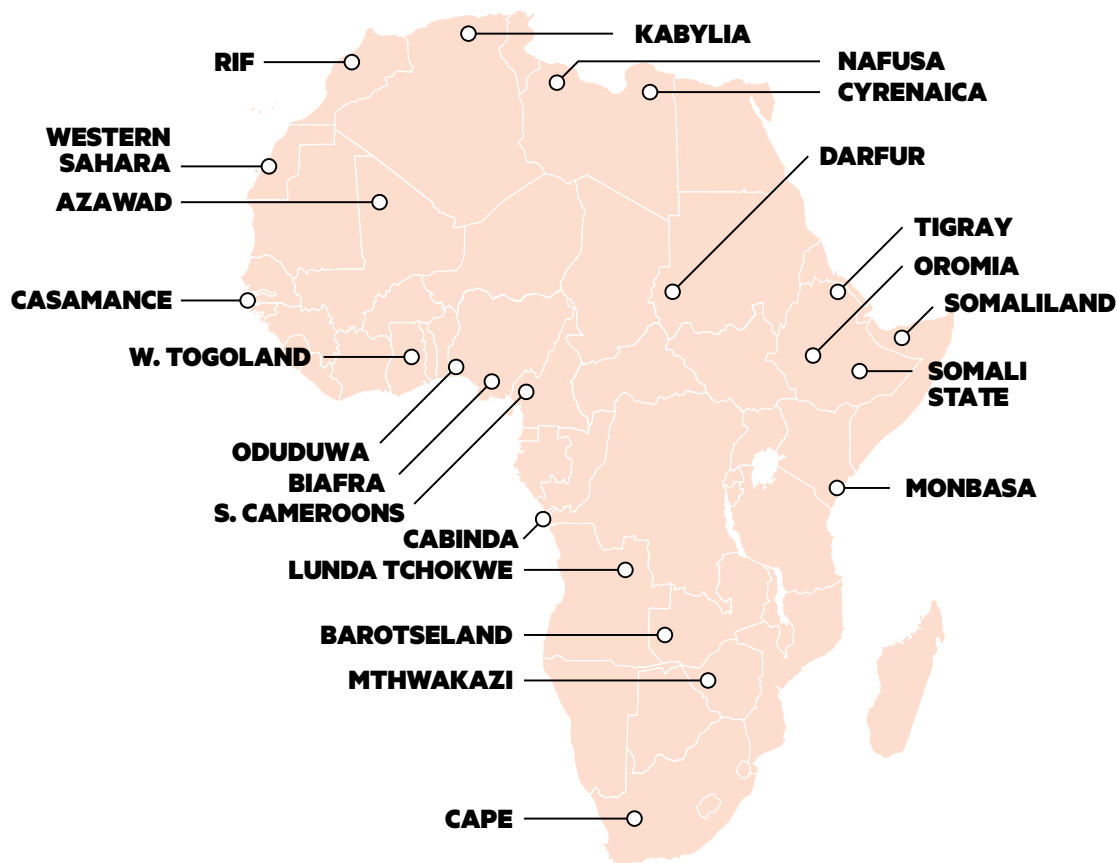
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Secessionist demands in Africa: an overview

David Forniès, CIEMEN, Barcelona

Secessionist movements have been appearing in Africa since the heyday of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s. A few of them emerged in territories that were not given the opportunity to achieve outright independence by their former European masters and were subsequently occupied or forcibly absorbed by neighbouring countries: such are the cases of Western Sahara, Namibia, or Eritrea—the two latter successfully seceded from South Africa and Ethiopia in the early 1990s after costly wars. Most others, however, seek the secession of territories that, at the moment of decolonization, were not separate colonies of their own—even if a singular colonial history is often argued by them.



Secessionism in Africa is a complex political phenomenon; its proponents usually invoke the right to self-determination while the foundations of the claims to secession usually lie in political grievances, sentiments of marginalization, historical narratives, and economic projects (Schomerus, Englebert and De Vries, 2018, p. 4). The same authors (p. 11-15) define four categories of African secessionism, namely “aspirational” if “understood as the solution to a broader crisis underwritten by marginalization, identity, or representation”; “as grievance” when “promises [are] made and broken” in post-colonial history; “as performance and posturing” if “used for political leverage”; and finally “as disenchantment”, when separation “does not necessarily bring about a solution to one’s problems.”

States respond to these demands through a “repertoire [that is] impressive in its diversity”, in which “variations on crackdowns, arrests of leaders or diaspora activists, controlling access to natural resources or the media are the least surprising” methods and, one might argue, the least uncommon too. Still, governments sometimes explore other ways too, including “creating their own factions of secessionist movement to cause division, offering improved development in secessionist areas or political appointments for secessionists” (p. 9). In a few cases, this translates into devolution or autonomy deals and, rarely, in self-determination referendums, such as in the case of Eritrea or South Sudan—after having paid the price, in both countries, of decades-long wars.

Why do secessionist demands emerge in the context of African postcolonial states? Which conditions help in the making of a sub-state national movement within them? A variety of reasons can be mentioned, among which: the existence of a separate administrative region predating colonial independence, such as in the cases of Southern Cameroons, South Sudan, Somaliland, or Casamance, to name a few; the prevalence of a sense of having become a ‘betrayed region’ by the postcolonial state; the struggle for land and resources, like in the cases of Western Sahara, Katanga, or Cabinda; the articulation of group interests of regional elites; a violent response by the state authorities to sub-state demands; a history of different educational trajectories; the mobilization of people on the grounds of so-called ‘identity markers’ such as language, religion, culture; and the support from diaspora communities (Tomàs, 2010, p. 11-47).

Secessionist movements in the last decade

Broadly speaking, it can be said that in the last decade up to the present day, some 20 to 25 secessionist movements have had enough impact to capture the attention of governments and media, albeit some of them intermittently. By no means does this imply that secessionist demands are limited to those 20 to 25 cases. No African secessionist movement has been successful in gaining outright independence, a self-determination referendum, or even a deal on meaningful devolution, since the 2011 South Sudanese referendum.

The Azawad secessionist movement, in West Africa’s Mali, is one of very few in Africa that has been included in a negotiation over decentralization with central authorities over the last decade. After an attempt to establish a Tuareg-led independent state in northern Mali in 2012, Azawad secessionists led by the MNLA were militarily defeated by a coalition of Islamist militias. The MNLA and other groups stroke a deal with Malian authorities in 2015 that should have led to further decentralization; the agreement is mostly unimplemented as of 2021.

Other secessionist movements have been active in West Africa over the last years. Talks between the Senegalese government and a fragmented Casamance movement have not led so far to any final deal.

Dormant conflicts have however re-emerged. Biafra being the main one, it is dealt through a chapter in this report by Celia Murias; yet others exist, such as the Ewe-led Western Togoland case in Ghana, which resurfaced in 2017, or the Yoruba secessionist aspirations to declare the Oduduwa Republic in south-western Nigeria.

In Northern Africa, Sahrawi demands for a referendum on self-determination have continued to be unheard by occupying power Morocco, which in recent months has intensified its repressive actions in the territory; a chapter in this report written by Karla Ferrera deals with this. In Libya, some Amazigh towns in the Nafusa mountain range have essayed a self-styled cultural autonomy that has not been recognized by either government of the fragmented nation (Zurutuza 2019), while some in the eastern Cyrenaica region have voiced demands for federalization. Self-determination demands in Amazigh-majority Kabylia have been met with continued repression by Algerian authorities. Following mass protests starting in 2016, some sectors in north Morocco's Rif have proposed to re-establish the Rif Republic that had been active in the 1920s. In Sudan, a 2020 deal is expected to bring a measure of devolution to war-ravaged Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions (Marsden 2020).

Further south, the East African region has witnessed continued efforts by the administration of the de facto independent state of Somaliland to secure recognition from other countries, albeit with limited success. Somalia has continued to deny that Somaliland has any right to independence, but has offered a federal deal instead. Media attention in the region has however turned toward Ethiopia, which since 2020 is undergoing an open armed conflict pitting the federal army and its allies against the Tigray region forces. Tigrayan parties are at the same time demanding a larger share of power in the country's government—as it was the case during the 1991-2018 period—as well as the maintenance or enlargement of the Tigray region's autonomy. Other autonomist and/or pro-independence demands have been raised over the last decade in other Ethiopian federated states, such as Oromia or the Somali State. The context and consequences of this case are explored in Josep Maria Royo's chapter in this report.

Also in East Africa, several groups in Kenya's coastal area have demonstrated for the secession of what they call a distinct nation centred around the cities of Mombasa and Lamu, mainly in 2012 and 2013, with some violence involved. Such calls are underpinned by grievances on economic and political marginalization. A 2013 reform that allowed for the devolution of financial and administrative powers to county governments “has animated engagement in a system long seen as poorly representing many coastal residents,” but “devolution has not solved the substantive economic grievances that continue to divide them” (Waddilove 2020, p. 715-716).

Two chapters of this report written by James Angove and Roxana Willis, and Inge Amundsen, are devoted to Central African cases, namely Southern Cameroons (also known as Ambazonia) and Cabinda, arguably the two most active secessionist movements in the region. In both of them, an armed conflict pitting the national army (Cameroon and Angola respectively) against several secessionist groups is ongoing; limited talks have been held in Cameroon, which however have not yielded results so far.

Also in Angola, another tension has been going on in the north-eastern region, where a local organisation, the MPPLT, advocates either autonomy or secession for the whole east of the country, or Lunda Tchokwe, as they call it. According to the MPPLT, Lunda Tchokwe was never formally part of the Portuguese colony of Angola, and would thus have the right to self-determination—a rationale that mirrors that of Cabinda secessionists. In January 2021, an MPPLT protest was met with harsh repression by the Angolan police, which resulted in the killing of a number of protesters (Agência Lusa 2021).

Next to Lunda-Tchokwe, but on the other side of the international border, some groups in the ancient kingdom of Barotseland have been voicing calls for autonomy or even secession from Zambia. The Barotseland movement claims that Zambia has not honoured a 1964 deal by which the territory should have enjoyed a measure of devolution, and further argues that it has endured economic marginalisation by the Zambian authorities. Protests were mostly held in the 2010-2014 period; three Barotseland leaders were arrested, tried and convicted on treason charges (Noyoo 2016).

To end with, Southern Africa has been relatively calm if compared to other subregions in the continent. Even though, some secession demands can be mentioned. With Namibia's Caprivan self-determination calls mostly

dormant for years now, an “upsurge of pro-Mthwakazi ethnic consciousness” has taken place in Zimbabwe’s western provinces of Matabeleland. A number of political organisations and parties have since 2000 been established, demanding Matabeleland’s secession from Zimbabwe, more especially since 2017, grounding their discourse on perceived discrimination of the Ndebele people by the Shona, who constitute the majority in the country (Hadebe 2020, p. 155-180). Meanwhile in South Africa, several Afrikaner and/or Boer groups have unsuccessfully voiced demands for the re-establishment of separate political entities for the populations they seek to represent—mostly whites and coloureds. Since 2016, the Cape Independence Party has been more vocal in its calls for a referendum on the secession from South Africa of what they call the Cape nation.

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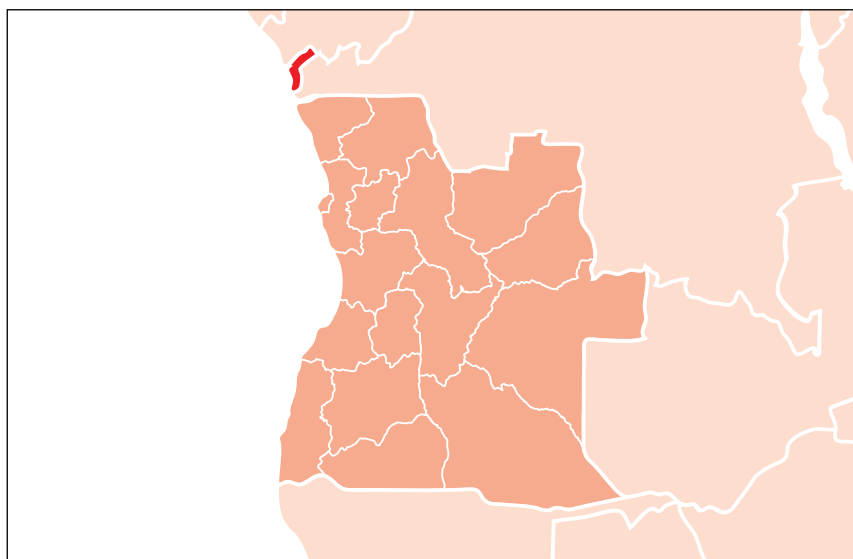
Cabinda separatism and human rights violations

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Background

Separatist movements have been active in the Cabinda enclave in northern Angola since independence. The enclave is separated from the rest of the country by a 60 kilometres wide strip of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the lower Congo River. The town of Cabinda is the chief population centre, and the total population is around 825,000.

Cabinda was formally a separate Portuguese protectorate, but soon after Portugal handed over sovereignty of Angola to independence groups in April 1974, the MPLA party (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) took control of mainland Angola, and the MPLA's armed wing FAA (Forças Armadas Angolanas) also took control over Cabinda. Cabinda was never explicitly handed over to the new Republic of Angola, and Cabindan independence movements therefore consider the occupation of the territory by Angolan forces to be illegal.



Ever since Angolan independence in 1974, the territory of Cabinda has seen separatist groups opposing the Government of Angola. Already in 1963 was the first liberation movement formed, the Frente para a Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda (Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda, FLEC) with its armed wing (Forças Armadas de Cabinda, FAC).

For much of the 1970s and 80s, FLEC operated a low-intensity guerrilla war, attacking Angolan government troops and economic targets, and creating havoc by kidnapping foreign employees working in the province's oil and construction businesses. The hostilities were mostly hit-and-run, at the same time as the government suppression of it was heavy, due to the importance of Cabinda as an oil-producing enclave.

Cabinda's petroleum production accounts for more than half of Angola's output, and stems from considerable offshore reserves. There are also a few onshore oil wells in the southern parts of Cabinda. Cabinda is one of these provinces rich in natural resources that would have been much better off without sharing the riches with a larger 'mother country', and therefore have sought independence. Others are Biafra in Nigeria, Zanzibar in Tanzania, and the successful independence of South Sudan.

Cabindans have always complained that they see few tangible benefits from the oil production. Economic grievances and prospects are at the core of the rationale for independence, even when history and geography is at the forefront of their official discourse. At the same time as the oil revenues are a part of the rationale for secession, the oil revenues are the main reason why Angola will not let it go.

FLEC has never been successful in gaining territory or any significant political concessions. The last time FLEC gained international attention was in 2010 with an attack on the Togo national football team. Their bus travelled through Cabinda on its way to the Africa Cup of Nations tournament. Two Togolese and the Angolan bus driver were killed by machineguns (BBC 2010).

In addition to heavy suppression by an illiberal central government that has considered the separatist movement an existential threat and has acted accordingly, the lack of success also stems from the fact that the Cabindan independence movement has been weakened by repeated, irregular fragmentation. At least four factions currently exist (DW 2013).

The province has for years been under direct military administration, and the repression of the separatists have also included the suppression of local voices like civil society organisations and traditional leaders. Although there has been some reported progress in the right to protest and in freedom of expression at the national level since João Lourenço took over the presidency in 2017, the new president and his administration seem to continue the policy of heavy suppression to keep oil-producing Cabinda under control. This includes some severe human rights abuses.

Recent action

Since around 2010, armed resistance has for the most part been replaced by an upsurge in non-violent protests. One of the factions, FLEC-Renovada, made a peace agreement with the Angolan government in 2006, and the faction is now defunct. The FLEC faction called FLEC-Posição Militar (FLEC-Military Position or FLEC-PM, also known as FLEC-Mingas) is one of the two factions that seems to have some protracted military presence on the ground in Cabinda. FLEC-PM was probably responsible (and claimed responsibility) for the attack on the Togo national football team in 2010.

The most active faction on the international scene is the Frente de Libertação do Estado de Cabinda (same shorthand FLEC, but "state" has now substituted "enclave"). This faction was formed in the Netherlands in 1996 and

is a radical faction, claiming full independence. It is a small group of activists, consisting mainly of students and exiles from Cabinda spread over Europe (Folha8 2017, IRBC 2013). They claim to have a government in exile (Governo Provisório),¹ led by President António Luís Lopes, “a Vice-President, a Secretary General, a Spokesperson, and Representatives in a number of European countries”, but this government is not recognised by any other government or international organisation. It is more an ambition than a reality.

Two new small groups were formed in 2018, the Movimento Independentista de Cabinda (MIC) and the União dos Cabindenses para a Independência (UCI). These are but two of the handful of independence groups that has called for independence by peaceful means, like manifestations, agitation, and a referendum on the question (DW 2020a, NaM 2021). There are also many blogs, websites, and Facebook groups on the issue of Cabinda separatism, history, current events, and strategy.

Recent reaction

Over many years, controversies over the number of armed attacks, turnout in manifestations, arrests, and people killed in the conflict has made it difficult to assess the level of recent secessionist activity.

In June 2020, FLEC-FAC claimed that it had killed 13 FAA soldiers on the border with the DRC, a fact not confirmed by the Angolan government (VoA 2020). In July 2020 they claimed that another five people died, including two soldiers, in clashes between separatists and government forces (DW 2020b). In September 2020, FLEC-FAC claimed that another attack by the FAA had left six people dead: three FAA soldiers, two on their side, and one civilian (Ver Angola 2020). Then, the Angolan Minister for State Security admitted that the province of Cabinda did have some guerrilla action “from time to time”, but there was “no instability” but “effective peace” in the territory (Novo Jornal 2020).

In August 2021, FLEC-FAC first announced that it had killed seven soldiers, just days before president João Lourenço planned to visit to the enclave (DW 2021a). Then FLEC-FAC issued another statement, claiming the killings had not taken place at all, that the announcement was a fake (by people seeking to discredit the movement), and that FLEC upheld its promise of a “unilateral ceasefire” (Angola24Horas 2021a).

Although one cannot trust the FLEC-FAC press releases on the number of dead and injured, it is obvious that the armed conflict is not entirely over. This is also seen for instance in the reinforcement of military contingents in Cabinda, especially in the inland areas, and the constant patrols on the roads of well-armed FAA personnel (Raúl Tati, opposition MP, in DW 2020c).

Nevertheless, there has been far less armed activity in Cabinda over the last few years, but a significant upsurge in non-violent protests and calls for dialogue and a negotiated settlement. The latest such non-violent protest was a march in Luanda in August 2021, organised by activists in Cabinda and in Luanda, “for the sake of dialogue for peace in Cabinda” (e-GLOBAL 2021a).

Even FLEC-FAC seems to have embraced peaceful means. In June 2020, the FLEC leader for instance called for the creation of a “round table” between representatives of Cabinda and Angola and for international mediation (Plataforma 2020, DW 2020b). In early February 2021 the FLEC-FAC “political-military leadership” called on President Joe Biden and the UN to organise a referendum on “the free and just self-determination of Cabinda” (Angola24Horas 2021b).

¹ See <http://www.cabinda.org/english.htm> and www.cabinda.org/francais.htm.

There are also strong indications that the government suppression of civilian peaceful protests is heavy. For instance, in January 2019, there was a large protest march in Cabinda, and dozens of protesters and their leaders were arrested as well as the use of “violent and excessive” force by security forces (Amnesty International 2019a, 2019b). In the words of Amnesty,

- The heavy deployment of security personnel armed with batons and guns —and the subsequent excessive use of force against peaceful protesters in order to prevent this planned protest— is yet another indication that authorities are not prepared to tolerate dissent (Amnesty International 2019b).

According to Human Rights Watch,

- Between January 28 and February 1, 2019, police arrested 63 Cabinda pro-independence activists ahead of an announced protest to celebrate the anniversary of the signing of the 1885 treaty that gave Cabinda the status of a protectorate of former colonial power Portugal. Many of the activists were members of the Movimento Independista de Cabinda (MIC), a peaceful separatist group that wants independence or autonomy from Angola.

Human Rights Watch reports that the crackdown on peaceful protesters and activists in the Cabinda enclave continued in 2020, and that when protests and marches took place, police violently interrupted them, and illegally detained the participants.

- In June, plainclothes police officers arbitrarily arrested the president of the separatist group Union for the Independence of Cabinda and his vice president after they displayed leaflets of the organization in the streets of the city of Cabinda. According to their lawyers, the police officers physically assaulted the two during the arrest. They were charged with rebellion, outrage against the state, and criminal association. As of early December, the two men were still detained at Cabinda Province Civil Prison under concerningly inhumane conditions, despite calls for their release (HRW 2021a).

Also in June 2020, police officers arrested a third UIC activist in his home in Cabinda. As of early December 2020, the UIC activists were still detained at Cabinda Province Civil Prison under concerning inhumane conditions, despite calls for their release (HRW 2020).

In April 2021, however, the three members of UCI were acquitted by the district tribunal in Cabinda, as the court could find no evidence for the charges. (But they did complain about more than eight months in detention and “psychological torture.”) (e-GLOBAL 2021b).

On 1 February 2021, on the 136th anniversary of the Simbulambuco agreement (between Portugal and the kings of Cabinda, which the separatists regard as proof that the enclave is a distinct entity from Angola), the Angolan police arrested a group of young people who intended to make a manifestation outside of the Embassy of Portugal in Luanda. They were, however, released a few hours later (Novo Jornal 2021, DW 2021b).

According to Human Rights Watch’s summary of the human rights situation in Angola for 2020,

- Some progress has been made in terms of respecting the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in the country. However, this progress did not extend to the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda, where the crackdown on peaceful protesters and activists has continued (HWR 2021).

According to Jeovanny Ventura, a long-time Cabinda independence activist,

- What the Angolan state is doing to us is persecution. The authorities treat us as terrorists. [...] And it has not improved under João Lourenço; everything we organise always ends up with supporters being taken into detention (Africa News 2019).

However, as the police and courts in Angola are not independent from the ruling party, these two events — the immediate release and the court acquittal of protesters— are only an indication of a possibly more lenient government approach to the peaceful demands for Cabinda independence.

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Human rights violations in Southern Cameroon

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'Southern Cameroon' in this report refers to the two minority anglophone regions in the majority francophone state of Cameroon; a legacy of the former Germany colony being divided by French and British colonial forces following World War I.² Appeals to the right of self-determination are ongoing in Southern Cameroon since independence in 1960/61. In 2016/17, these grievances escalated into a full-scale conflict between minority anglophone populations and the majority francophone state. This report outlines human rights abuses committed by the state against Southern Cameroonians. The first section summarises human rights abuses post-independence up to the recent conflict. The second section provides an overview of the escalated human rights abuses recorded since the outbreak of conflict.



² For further context, see Konings, Piet, and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, (1997) 'The anglophone problem in Cameroon.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, no. 2: 207-229.

Human rights violations in Southern Cameroon since independence in 1960/61

Southern Cameroon became independent in 1961 “by joining the independent Republic of Cameroon”.³ Thereby, Southern Cameroon formally retained a kind of institutional autonomy through a federal system of governance, involving “multipartyism”, a degree of the rule of law, and maintenance of educational and judicial systems established under British rule.⁴ However, a series of actions led by the former President Ahmadou Ahidjo gradually eroded the institutional autonomy of the anglophone regions.⁵ Among other reforms, Ahidjo introduced one-party rule in 1966 and dismantled the federal system in favour of a unitary state after a referendum held in 1972.

Shortly after Ahidjo’s resignation, Paul Biya became the President of Cameroon in 1982 and has been the single ruler since then.⁶ Within two years, Biya changed the official name of the country from the “United Republic of Cameroon” to the “Republic of Cameroon”, an act that certain Southern Cameroonians interpreted as further undermining the anglophone status.⁷ Subsequently, several anglophone opposition movements emerged, some calling for a return to federal rule, and others, such as the Ambazonia Movement of Fon Gorji Dinka, appealing for the more radical reform of secession.⁸ In the mid-1990s, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) formed as a non-violent political organization that appealed for the right of self-determination.⁹

There is a well-documented history of (actual and perceived) marginalisation of the anglophone regions and peoples in terms of political representation and socioeconomic under-development since the 1970s.¹⁰ There are differences between the anglophone regions: the World Bank reports that in 2014, 55 percent of the North West population lived below the national poverty line and had the third highest rate of child mortality in the country; by contrast, the South West was relatively prosperous, compared to the rest of the country.¹¹

Still, anglophones across both regions are reportedly underrepresented in the public sector – a means of access to a stable income in Cameroon,¹² and a measure itself of political (in)equality. Indeed, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted the inequality between the English- and French-speaking populations in the enjoyment of their rights.¹³ The Committee expressed concern about the widespread centralisation of governmental institutions, having made the French language predominant and generated further disadvantage for anglophones.

Moreover, before the conflict, Cameroonian security forces had violated other human rights in Southern Cameroon, including a pattern of torture, extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention

3 UN General Assembly Resolution 1352 XIV, of October 1959. Percival, J. (2008). *The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite. Choice or Betrayal: Choice Or Betrayal*. African Books Collective, at 306.

4 *International and Comparative Law* 235.

5 Konings, Piet, and Francis B. Nyamnjoh. (2019) “Anglophone secessionist movements in Cameroon.” In *Secessionism in African Politics*, pp. 59-89. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

6 Republic of Cameroon, (2021) ‘Biography of President Paul BIYA’ <https://www.prc.cm/en/the-president/biography>.

7 Konings and Nyamnjoh, n 1 above.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Pelican, M., (forthcoming) ‘The Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon – historical and political background’, UAS.

10 Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Hans De Marie Heungoup, (2017) ‘The “Anglophone Crisis”: The Cameroonian Postcolony’ 116/464 *African Affairs*, 529-30. Konings, P. and Nyamnjoh, F.B. (2003), *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon*, Leiden: Brill.

11 The World Bank, (2021) ‘The Socio-Political Crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon: Assessing the Economic and Social Impacts’, page 11. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/795921624338364910/pdf/The-Socio-Political-Crisis-in-the-Northwest-and-Southwest-Regions-of-Cameroon-Assessing-the-Economic-and-Social-Impacts.pdf>.

12 *Ibid.*, page 15.

13 Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the nineteenth to twenty-first periodic reports of Cameroon (CERD/C/CMR/CO/19-21) 26 September 2014, para 13.

across the regions of Cameroon, as seen in various Concluding Observations by the UN Committee Against Torture¹⁴ and the UN Human Rights Committee.¹⁵

There is a body of jurisprudence documenting state violations of anglophone civil-political rights.¹⁶ The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights judgement brought on behalf of Southern Cameroonians found that the State of Cameroon had violated Articles 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7(1), 10, 11, 19 and 26 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights.¹⁷ Recommendations – which went unheeded – included abolishing all discriminatory practices against the anglophone minority, fairer legal processes, fairer national resource distribution, and that the state enter constructive dialogue with the SCNC, among others, to resolve the constitutional issues, as well as grievances threatening national unity.

Human rights violations committed since the outbreak of civil conflict

Continued discrimination led to anglophone protests in 2016, rapidly progressing into an armed conflict where human rights violations accelerated in degree and kind. The incidents sparking the conflict took place in October 2016. Large numbers of anglophone lawyers and teachers went on strike against perceived government-backed attempts to marginalise traditional English practices within anglophone courts and schools.¹⁸ These movements coalesced into a larger protest against the central government and demands for the return of federalism.

The Cameroon state responded with a heavy-handed crackdown on dissent.¹⁹ Tension escalated, fuelling further clashes into 2017, bringing in turn several deaths, hundreds of arrests, and destruction of numerous government and civilian properties.²⁰ The government attempted to further suppress anglophone dissent by then cutting internet provisions in the two anglophone regions for several months.²¹

By mid-2017, following the arrest or radicalisation of more moderate voices in the anglophone movement, the remaining leaders of the anglophone groups shifted goals: from the reinstatement of federalism to full secession

14 Committee Against Torture, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Cameroon (CAT/C/CMR/CO/5) 18 December 2017; Committee Against Torture, Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 19 of the Convention, Concluding observations of the Committee against Torture (CAT/C/CMR/CO/4) 19 May 2010; Committee Against Torture, Consideration Of Reports Submitted By States Parties Under Article 19 Of The Convention, Conclusions and recommendations of the Committee against Torture (CA T/C/CR/31/6) 11 February 2004.

15 Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Cameroon (CCPR/C/CMR/CO/5) 30 November 2017.

16 For example see: Mukong v. Cameroon, United Nations Human Rights Committee, 458/1991, May 21, 1994. Fongum Gorji- Dinka v Cameroon Communication No 1134/2002, UN Doc CCPR/C/83/D/1134/2002 (2005). Titiahonjo v Cameroon No 1186/2003, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/91/D/1186/2003 (2007).

17 Mgwanga Gunme v. Cameroon, Comm. 266/2003, 26th ACHPR AAR Annex (Dec 2008 – May 2009)

18 Al Jazeera (December 5th 2016) 'Cameroon teachers, lawyers strike in battle for English: Anglophones say French is being imposed in schools and court rooms in English-speaking regions.' <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/cameroon-teachers-lawyers-strike-english-161205095929616.html>. Pommerolle, Marie-Emmanuelle and Hans de Marie Heungoup (2017), 'The "Anglophone crisis": A tale of the Cameroonian postcolony.' *African Affairs* 116 (464): 526-538.

19 Radina Gigova 'Rights groups call for probe into protesters' deaths in Cameroon.' (C.N.N. December 15th 2016) <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/15/world/cameroon-protesters-deaths/index.html>

20 These Killings Can Be Stopped" Abuses by Government and Separatist Groups in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions, Human Rights Watch (19 July 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/07/19/these-killings-can-be-stopped/abuses-government-and-separatist-groups-camerouns>. Bamenda Protests: Mass Arrests in Cameroon, BBC News (23 Nov. 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38078238>.

21 Abdi Latif Dahir 'African countries disrupt internet connectivity more than anywhere else.' (Quartz Africa, 19th November 2018) <https://qz.com/africa/1468491/africa-internet-shutdowns-grow-longer-in-cameroon-chad-ethiopia/> (last accessed 27 October 2019). Yarno Ritzen, Cameroon internet shutdowns cost Anglophones millions, Al Jazeera (26 Jan. 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/cameroon-internet-shutdowns-cost-anglophones-millions-180123202824701.html>.

and the creation of an independent anglophone state.²² By October 2017, secessionist groups declared the anglophone regions independent of Cameroon, renaming the region Ambazonia.²³ Since then, armed separatists and government forces have violently clashed across the anglophone territories.

News reports estimate 4,000 people have been killed in the conflict; credible informal sources suggest the count could be far higher.²⁴ The UN records 705,800 people as internally displaced by the conflict and 63,600 Cameroonians as taking refuge in Nigeria.²⁵ In 2019, the UN reported that over 80 percent of schools had closed down due to a school boycott backed by the armed separatist movement, affecting more than 600,000 children.²⁶ 2021 reports indicate the rate of school closures has only marginally improved.²⁷

Throughout the conflict, credible reports of gross human rights violations committed by state and a multitude of separatist armed forces have emerged.²⁸ The remainder of this report details thematic human rights violations by the Cameroon state, which is signatory to several relevant international conventions.²⁹

Extra-judicial and unlawful killings

Numerous reports from human rights organisations³⁰ and international press outlets³¹ allege that Cameroonian security forces – in particular, the Rapid Intervention Battalion – have conducted a systematic campaign of terror against anglophone communities. The alleged violence includes extra-judicial, and likely unlawful, killings of civilians, such as summary executions and deaths from torture. Multiple organisations report that security forces have killed non-combatants, including unarmed civilians fleeing the conflict,³² individuals with physical or mental disabilities,³³ the elderly,³⁴ and children.³⁵ Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported security forces attacking people

22 Reuters 'RPT-State crackdown fuels independence push in Anglophone Cameroon' (October 3rd, 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/cameroon-politics-separatists/rpt-state-crackdown-fuels-independence-push-in-anglophone-cameroon-idUSL8N1MD631>

23 C. Nna-Emeka Okereke 'Analysing Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis' (2018) 10/3 Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses 10.

24 Craig, J., 'Violence in Cameroon's Anglophone crisis takes high civilian toll' (1st April 2021, Aljazeera) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/1/violence-in-cameroon-anglophone-crisis-takes-high-civilian-toll>

25 Cameroon: Situation Report, OCHA (2 Feb. 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Cameroon%20-%202026%20Jan%202021.pdf>.

26 UN, 'Over 80 per cent of schools in anglophone Cameroon shut down, as conflict worsens' (21 June 2019) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041071>.

27 Note 24 above.

28 See the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis: Database of Atrocities, hosted by the University of Toronto: <https://research.rotman.utoronto.ca/Cameroon/>; Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/africa/cameroon/>; Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/west-and-central-africa/cameroon/>; BBC Africa Eye: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0707w39>; the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa: <https://chrda.org/>; the International Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/>; and American Bar Association: https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/rule_of_law/where_we_work/africa/cameroon/news/.

29 This includes: The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ratified 30 June 1989); The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (ratified 19 December 1986); The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (ratified 23 August 1994); Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified 11 January 1993); The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ratified 24 June 1971); The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ratified 27 June 1984); The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified 27 June 1984); The four Geneva Conventions of 1949, as well as the two Additional Protocols adopted in 1977.

30 Amnesty International 'A turn for the worse: Violence and Human rights abuses in Cameroon' (2017) <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR1784812018ENGLISH.PDF> p.21-25.

31 Peter Zongo 'This is a genocide: villages burn as war rages in blood-soaked Cameroon.' (The Guardian May 30th 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/may/30/cameroon-killing-escalate-anglophone-crisis>.

32 Note 29 above.

33 Human Rights Watch (2018) "These Killings can be stopped" Government and Separatists human rights abuses in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions.' https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/cameroon0718_web2.pdf.

34 Ibid.

35 Ruth Maclean 'Cameroonian soldiers accused of killing baby as family flees: Army denies involvement in death of four-month old in violence-plagued anglophone region.' (The Guardian, May 27th 2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/27/cameroonian-soldiers-accused-of-killing-baby-as-family-flees>. Kahiu, M., 'Seven-year-old Pupil Killed by Stray Bullet Near Catholic School in Cameroon, Priest Says' (Aciafrica, 20 August, 2021) <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/4118/seven-year-old-pupil-killed-by-stray-bullet-near-catholic-school-in-cameroon-priest-says>.

in and around health facilities, summarily executing suspected separatists,³⁶ killing a pregnant nurse,³⁷ and a woman attempting to alert residents at about a pending government raid. Similarly, Amnesty International reported that state forces killed a humanitarian worker.³⁸

A pattern has emerged of state security forces targeting anglophone villages and killing multiple civilians accused of harbouring separatist fighters. Examples include:

- In early December 2017, a state forces raid in Kajifu, killing at least three unarmed men; eyewitnesses and residents reporting a further nine men killed.³⁹ On 13th December 2017, four unlawful killings, 23 arbitrary arrests and destruction of property in Dadi.⁴⁰
- On 14th December 2017, an elderly man executed outside his house in Bodam and other dwellings destroyed.⁴¹
- On 2nd February 2018, security forces shooting and killing at least one unarmed man in Belo, beating and arbitrarily arresting dozens, killing four in custody.⁴²
- On April 4th 2019, state forces killing five civilian men in Meluf, including one with a mental disability, wounding one woman.⁴³
- On 23rd January 2020, state soldiers killing at least 14 people in the Ndoh village, wounding at least five others, including two youths.⁴⁴
- On 14th February 2020, the Ngarburh massacre during which 23 civilians were killed, including 15 children.⁴⁵
- On January 10th 2021, nine civilians killed in Mautu, including a woman and a child, and four civilians injured.⁴⁶

This list is not exhaustive and the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) records many other incidents,⁴⁷ such as 'Operation Bamenda Clean' in September 2020, during which multiple unarmed civilians were intermittently killed.⁴⁸

36 Human Rights Watch 'Cameroon: Government Forces Attack Village: Investigate Murders of Civilians , Violence in and around Health Centres.' (April 10th 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/10/cameroon-government-forces-attack-village>.

37 Human Rights Watch 'Cameroon: New Attacks on Civilians By Troops, Separatists: At Least 170 Killed; Hundreds of Homes Burned.' (March 28th 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/28/cameroon-new-attacks-civilians-troops-separatists>.

38 Amnesty International, 'Cameroon: Rise in killings in Anglophone regions ahead of parliamentary elections' (February 6th 2020) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/cameroon-rise-in-killings-in-anglophone-regions/>.

39 Note 29 above.

40 IBID, Page 20.

41 IBID, PAGE 22.

42 IBID PAGE 25.

43 Human Rights Watch, 'Cameroon: Government Forces Attack Village' (10th April 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/10/cameroon-government-forces-attack-village>

44 Note 37 above.

45 UN, (18th February 2020) 'Guterres 'deeply concerned' over deadly assault in north-west Cameroon' <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057571>.

46 Human Rights Watch, (4th February 2021) 'Nine Killed in Army Attack', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/04/cameroon-nine-killed-army-attack>

47 CHRDA, (11th March 2021) 'A Human Rights Situation Report of The North West And South West Regions Of Cameroon Between October 2020 And February 2021' <https://www.chrda.org/a-human-rights-situation-report-of-the-north-west-and-south-west-regions-of-cameroon-between-october-2020-and-february-2021/>. CHRDA, (31st August 2020) 'Human Rights Violations Committed by The Military Between May And August 2020 In The North-West (Nwr) And Southwest (Swr) Regions Of Cameroon' <https://www.chrda.org/human-rights-violations-committed-by-the-military-between-may-and-august-2020-in-the-north-west-nwr-and-southwest-swr-regions-of-cameroon/>.

48 CHRDA, (6th October 2020) 'Human Rights Report... In The Period August And September 2020' <https://www.chrda.org/chrda-human-rights-report-covering-acts-of-violence-committed-by-the-cameroon-military-and-non-state-armed-groups-against-civilians-in-the-north-west-and-south-west-regions-of-cameroon-in-the-period-a/>.

Widespread property destruction

Another tactic of state security forces, alongside village raids and massacres, is widespread property destruction, in which security forces burn down hundreds of structures such as homes, businesses, and local government buildings.⁴⁹ CHRDA has published a report alleging that from the conflict beginning to May 2019, state forces targeted 206 towns and villages in the anglophone regions with arson attacks, as their inhabitants either partially or fully flee the area.⁵⁰ Other organisations, such as HRW,⁵¹ Amnesty International⁵² and BBC News Africa⁵³ have also independently reported security forces engaging in mass arson and property damage. These allegations have been verified by eyewitness testimony, video evidence, and/or satellite images showing destroyed structures.⁵⁴

Sexual violence

There have been credible reports by human rights organisations that security force officers have committed frequent acts of sexual violence against female civilians throughout the conflict.⁵⁵ In a CHRDA survey conducted 24 months into the conflict, 75% of their respondents reported experiencing sexual or physical violence.⁵⁶ The frequency of sexual violence has led some observers to describe rape as a ‘weapon of war’ against anglophone women.⁵⁷ This is reflected in an attack on the 1st March 2020 in the anglophone village of Ebam in which more than 50 state soldiers attacked residents; at least 20 women were raped by the army soldiers, including four with disabilities.⁵⁸

Freedom of expression and assembly violations, and freedom of the press

The Cameroonian authorities have consistently violated the rights to freedoms of speech and assembly, particularly when it concerns criticism of the government and is directed against the President. The crisis has deepened pre-existing practices of censorship, with several NGOs that represent the interests of journalists arguing that authorities have instigated a climate of fear that has led to reporters self-censoring to avoid persecution.⁵⁹ Moreover, the U.S. State Department has noted that police forces have arrested several journalists for investigating human rights abuses within the anglophone areas.⁶⁰

On 15th May 2020, security forces arrested a freelance journalist, Kingsley Njoka, purportedly for his critical stance on social media about government handling of the crisis. A military tribunal later indicted him on

49 O’Grady, S., (The Washing Post, February 5th 2019) ‘Divided by Language: Cameroon’s Crackdown on its English-Speaking Minority is fuelling a secessionist Movement.’ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/cameroon-anglophone-crisis/>.

50 CHRDA, (24th May 2019) ‘206 Villages Raided And Partially Or Severely Burnt In The Anglophone Regions Of Cameroon Since 2016’ <https://www.chrda.org/206-villages-raided-and-partially-or-severely-burnt-in-the-anglophone-regions-of-cameroon-since-2016/>.

51 Human Rights Watch, (March 28th 2019), ‘Cameroon: New Attacks on Civilians By Troops, Separatists: At Least 170 Killed; Hundreds of Homes Burned.’ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/28/cameroon-new-attacks-civilians-troops-separatists>.

52 Note 29 above, pp.23-27. Note 37 above.

53 B.B.C. News Africa ‘Cameroon Burning: The Unseen War – Full Documentary – BBC Africa Eye’ (YouTube, June 25th 2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ct_SLnAGDuM.

54 See also the Database of Atrocities, Note 27 above.

55 Human Rights Watch, (July 22nd 2019), ‘Cameroon: Security Forces Kill Civilians, Rape Woman Investigate Crimes, Hold Security Forces Accountable’ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/22/cameroon-security-forces-kill-civilians-rape-woman>.

56 CHRDA, (June 3rd 2019), ‘Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity’ <https://chrda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Camerouns-Unfolding-Catastrophe-CHRDA-RWCHR-2019.pdf> p.33.

57 Young, A., (France 24, April 19th 2019), ‘The 51% - Rape as a weapon of War: Sexual Violence on the rise in Cameroon’s Anglophone Region’ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190419-51-percent-sexual-violence-cameroon-anglophone-region-iran-boxer-brexit-women-impact>.

58 Human Rights Watch, (26th February, 2021), ‘Cameroon: Survivors of Military Assault Await Justice’ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/26/cameroon-survivors-military-assault-await-justice>.

59 See for example Freedom House ‘Freedom of the Press 2017: Cameroon Profile’ (2017) <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/cameroon>.

60 U.S. Department of State, (March 18th 2019), ‘Cameroon 2018 Human Rights Report.’ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Cameroon-2018.pdf>, p17-19.

charges relating to secession and collusion with armed separatist forces.⁶¹ In June 2020 it came to light that anglophone journalist Samuel Wazizi, accused of separatist affiliation, had died in detention. Up to that point his whereabouts had been unknown; he was taken into custody on 2nd August 2019 and passed away just 15 days later.⁶²

In relation to freedom of assembly, the government has been noted for its heavy-handed response to peaceful protests, often deploying armed security forces that led to violent clashes, with protesters shot and mass arbitrary arrests.⁶³ Additionally, the worsening political climate in the country led to the arrest and imprisonment of prominent government critics including opposition leader Maurice Kamto, imprisoned for nine months. Many opposition activists remain imprisoned.⁶⁴

Civil society

There has been a sustained and mounting governmental pressure on civil society organisations and international bodies engaging them. After the Ngarbuh massacre on 14th February 2020, HRW published a detailed report of the incident.⁶⁵ Subsequently, Atanga Nji accused NGOs, including HRW and Amnesty International, of “fueling terrorism, destabilizing Cameroon, and producing fake reports”.⁶⁶ In December 2020, Atanga Nji also announced a ban on Médecins Sans Frontières, accusing them of having treated armed separatists. In early August 2021, MSF withdrew from Cameroon altogether.⁶⁷ Moreover, on the 26th of that month, Atanga Nji decreed that all foreign associations send representatives to submit information about their relationship to civil society in Cameroon, which Lord Boateng in a House of Lords debate in the UK recently referred to as “designed to suppress and hold back the activities of civil society organisations”.⁶⁸

Arbitrary and illegal detention

Since the start of the conflict, security and police forces have illegally detained opposition activists,⁶⁹ those suspected of aiding separatists,⁷⁰ or those who criticise the government.⁷¹ Pre-trial detention appears to be normal, sometimes for months at a time.⁷² HRW reports that the government engages in a practice of ‘forced disappearances’, where individuals are arrested and held incommunicado without any formal charges or their families/

61 Ibid.

62 U.S. Department of State, (30th March 2021), ‘2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon’ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/cameroon/>.

63 Amnesty International, (28th January 2019), ‘Cameroon: Peaceful Protesters Targeted in Violent Crackdown must be released.’ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/cameroon-peaceful-protesters-targeted-in-violent-crackdown-must-be-released/>.

64 Al Jazeera, (October 16th 2019), ‘Cameroon’s opposition leader Maurice Kamto released: Move is latest in a series of concessions from President Paul Biya, who is under pressure over a crackdown on dissent.’ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/cameroon-court-orders-release-opposition-leader-maurice-kamto-191005083744836.html>.

65 Human Rights Watch, (25th February 2020), ‘Cameroon: Civilians Massacred in Separatist Area’, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/25/cameroon-civilians-massacred-separatist-area>.

66 Human Rights Watch, (16th April 2020), ‘Cameroon: Make Massacre Investigation Public’ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/cameroon-make-massacre-investigation-public>.

67 Kindzeka, M. E., (August 4th 2021), ‘Doctors Without Borders Leaving West Cameroon After Government Suspension’ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/doctors-without-borders-leaving-west-cameroon-after-government-suspension>.

68 UK Parliament, (8th September 2021) [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-09-08/debates/472E179A-7BAF-4972-A47E-D3E-48B0B90D8/Sub-SaharanAfrica\(ReportFromTheInternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommittee\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-09-08/debates/472E179A-7BAF-4972-A47E-D3E-48B0B90D8/Sub-SaharanAfrica(ReportFromTheInternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommittee)).

69 Human Rights Watch ‘Cameroon: Opposition Leaders Arrested: Violent Crackdown on Protests.’ (January 30th 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/30/cameroon-opposition-leaders-arrested>.

70 Reuters, (October 3rd 2019), ‘Cameroon releases 333 prisoners amid peace talks; separatists say not enough.’

71 Maclean, R., (The Guardian, June 4th 2019) ‘Hundreds of opposition members arrested in Cameroon: Security forces take 351 into custody after protesters call for release of their party leader’ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/04/hundreds-of-opposition-members-arrested-cameroon>.

72 U.S. Department of State, (March 18th 2019), ‘Cameroon 2018 Human Rights Report.’ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Cameroon-2018.pdf>.

legal representatives being informed of their whereabouts.⁷³ In January 2018, 47 Cameroonian anglophone activists were arrested in Nigeria and handed over to Cameroonian authorities and reportedly held incommunicado for six months.⁷⁴ Relatedly, there have been several claims that lawyers have been denied access to their clients, sometimes facing threats and physical violence if they insist on upholding their clients' legal rights.⁷⁵

Torture, inhumane conditions, arbitrary punishment and humiliation

Reports regularly describe conditions and treatment inside detention facilities as dehumanising. The Ministry of Justice and human rights bodies have reported that many prisons in Cameroon operate at several thousand beyond their designed capacity,⁷⁶ causing endemic overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions.⁷⁷ Additionally, reports allege prison guards of using excessive force to punish dissent, frequently beating and humiliating prisoners.⁷⁸ A prison riot in 2019 saw violent clashes with guards; several prisoners were beaten by gangs of guards, and live ammunition was used to suppress the protests.⁷⁹

Furthermore, several human rights groups have documented instances of security forces detaining and then torturing civilians during raids against suspected separatists' strongholds, leading to multiple deaths.⁸⁰ HRW documents that security forces have been utilising a detention centre operated by the State Defence Secretariat in the nation's capital to routinely torture prisoners held there incommunicado.⁸¹ They credibly allege routine use of torture against prisoners, including beatings, drownings, electrocutions, denial of medical provisions, overcrowding and restrictions of fresh air and access to clean water.⁸²

Death penalty

Whereas some anglophone prisoners have been detained for years without trial, others have been given disproportionate life sentences.⁸³ Most recently, four anglophone men convicted for involvement in the armed separatist movement were charged with terrorism and sentenced to death by firing squad.⁸⁴ Although the death sentence is unlikely to be carried out, these sentences point to a common trend in the anglophone struggle for self-determination, which is to become labelled as terrorists by the Cameroon state.

73 Human Rights Watch, (May 6th 2019), 'Cameroon: Routine Torture, Incommunicado Detention: UN Security Council Should Condemn Abuses, Demand Reforms' <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/06/cameroon-routine-torture-incommunicado-detention>.

74 HRW, note 19 above.

75 B.B.C. News, (September 17th, 2019), 'Newsday: Cameroon's Lawyers on Strike' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07njmsz>.

76 Amnesty International, (2018), "Amnesty International Report 2017/18: State of the World's Human Rights." <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL1067002018ENGLISH.PDF> p.114.

77 Amnesty International, (October 13th 2017), 'Cameroon: Inmates 'packed like sardines' in overcrowded prisons following deadly Anglophone protests.' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/10/cameroon-inmates-packed-like-sardines-in-overcrowded-prisons-following-anglophone-protests/>.

78 Human Rights Watch, (August 20th 2019), 'Cameroon: Detainees Tortured Abuse, Incommunicado Detention at Yaoundé Prison; Enforced Disappearances.' <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/20/cameroon-detainees-tortured>.

79 Amnesty International, (July 23rd 2019), 'Cameroon: Gunshots amid prison riot must be investigated.' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/cameroon-gunshots-amid-prison-riot-must-be-investigated/>.

80 Note 29 above, p.21-22.

81 Note 75 above.

82 Ibid.

83 Voice of Africa, (August 20th 2019), 'Critics Condemn Life Sentences for Cameroon Separatist Leaders.' <https://www.voanews.com/africa/critics-condemn-life-sentences-cameroon-separatist-leaders>.

84 Reuters, (September 9th, 2021), 'Cameroon sentences four men to death for shooting attack on school.' <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/cameroon-sentences-four-men-death-shooting-attack-school-2021-09-08/>.

A note on violent offences committed by armed separatist groups

This report has focused on the human rights abuses committed by the state of Cameroon in the conflict, in recognition of the special duties that states have towards citizens. There are also credible reports of crimes being committed by multiple armed separatist groups in the conflict. In 2017, International Crisis Group distinguishes between a dozen or so small-scale armed splinter groups and several large-scale rebel militias, which include “the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), led by Ayaba Cho Lucas and Benedict Nwana Kuah, the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADEF), commanded by Ebenezer Derek Mbongo Akwanga, and the homonymous group called Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SCDF), under the leadership of Nso Foncha Nkem.”⁸⁵ The number of armed groups appears to be increasing, and a report in 2021 claimed that there are now up to 30 different separatist armed forces.⁸⁶

Both the human rights organisations and the international media have verified that separatists have been active in killing both military and civilian targets throughout the conflict.⁸⁷ In addition, there are credible reports that secessionist extremists have murdered civilians during the conflict, particularly targeting those whom they suspect of colluding with the central government, breaking secessionist-backed strikes or school shut-downs, or criticising secessionist policies or actions.⁸⁸ Some killings attributed to separatist groups have been particularly violent, including beheadings and filmed uses of spectacular violence against women which have been disseminated on social media.⁸⁹ Most recently, killings have included targeting traditional leaders in the anglophone regions.⁹⁰

Amnesty International collected data which suggested that between February 2017 and May 2018, 42 schools in the anglophone regions had been attacked by extreme separatists.⁹¹ Moreover, Amnesty International has gathered data suggesting that between the same period, 36 schools were targeted by arson attacks.⁹² After compiling media reports, Human Rights Watch estimated that since October 2018, at least 350 people have been kidnapped and ransomed by separatists’ militias, many of whom were school children.⁹³ Further, UNICEF reported 35 attacks on educational institutions in the conflict’s regions in 2019, and estimates 1.1 million children are out of school due to the conflict.⁹⁴

Violence has escalated in 2021, and certain armed separatist factions have begun using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Since January 2021, “separatists have also carried out at least 27 attacks involving IEDs in 13

85 International Crisis Group (21 December 2017). ‘Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: Dialogue Remains the Only Viable Solution.’ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroons-anglophone-crisis-dialogue-remains-only-viable-solution>.

86 Craig, J., Aljazeera, (1 April 2021), ‘Violence in Cameroon’s Anglophone crisis takes high civilian toll.’ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/1/violence-in-cameroon-anglophone-crisis-takes-high-civilian-toll>.

87 Amnesty International, (18th September 2018), ‘Cameroon: Horrific Violence escalates further in Anglophone regions.’ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/cameroon-horrific-violence-escalates-further-in-anglophone-regions/>.

88 Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, (June 3rd 2019), ‘Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity.’ <https://chrda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Cameroons-Unfolding-Catastrophe-CHR-DA-RWCHR-2019.pdf> p.35-37.

89 Willis, R., McAulay, J., Ndeunyema, N., Angove, J. (2019). ‘Human Rights Abuses in the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis: A Submission of Evidence to UK Parliament.’ <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/human-rights-abuses-in-the-cameroon-anglophone-crisis-recommendations-for-action/>

90 Bone, M., and Nkwain, A., African Arguments, (29 June 2021), ‘Why are Cameroonian separatists attacking local chiefs?’ <https://africanarguments.org/2021/06/anglophone-crisis-why-are-cameroonian-separatists-attacking-local-chiefs/>.

91 Amnesty International, (2017), ‘A turn for the worse: Violence and Human rights abuses in Cameroon.’ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR1784812018ENGLISH.PDF>.

92 Ibid.

93 Human Rights Watch, (March 28th 2019), ‘Cameroon: New Attacks on Civilians by Troops, Separatists: At Least 170 Killed; Hundreds of Homes Burned.’ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/28/cameroon-new-attacks-civilians-troops-separatists>.

94 UNICEF Press Release, (06 November 2020), ‘UNICEF alarmed by spike in school attacks in Cameroon.’ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-alarmed-spike-school-attacks-cameroon>.

towns across the two regions, more than all previous years of the conflict combined, according to UN reports and ACLED data.”⁹⁵ There is no indication that the violence will abate without meaningful steps towards peace talks.

As this report indicates, the state of Cameroon has a long history of human rights violations against the anglo-phone minority in Cameroon. Human rights violations have been ongoing since independence and have escalated following the emergence of civil conflict. It seems highly unlikely the Cameroon state will desist from these practices anytime soon.

95 Note 85 above.

Violation of human rights and criminalisation of the secessionist movement and civil population in the Biafra region

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Since October 2015, the historical tension between the Nigerian state and separatist movements in the southern region of Biafra has increased, following the arrest of Nnamdi Nwannekaenyi Kanu, the leader of pro-independence organisation Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), on charges of sedition, incitement to ethnic hatred, and treason. Since then, an intensification of protest and social mobilisation has taken place, coupled with multiple allegations of human rights violations by the Nigerian Security Forces (NSF), especially in the context of the banning of the IPOB movement, its designation as a terrorist group, and the partisan and overreaching application of counter-terrorism law provisions. This has led to increased tension and insecurity, as well as to the establishment of a Biafran paramilitary group, the ESN.



Presentation

Since the creation of the Nigerian state after independence in 1960, the country has faced the challenge of articulating the different ethnic nationalities. The inability of successive governments to address problems associated with citizenship, ethnicity, religion, or resource distribution has aggravated perceptions of grievances and discontent, leading to the emergence of separatist demands in several regions (Hausa/Fulani; Yoruba; Tiv; Niger Delta; Biafra). The most paradigmatic episode of such tensions was the 1967-1970 civil war between the state and the self-declared Republic of Biafra.⁹⁶ After 30 months of war in which an estimated 1 to 3 million people were killed, Biafran forces surrendered to federal government forces in January 1970, bringing an end to the war and the reunification of Nigeria. After three decades of military rule, the advent of democracy in 1999 generated new expectations for an accommodation of identities and political restructuring demands. In the Igbo region, although after the war the Nigerian government implemented a Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Reintegration (3R) policy summarised in the slogan of “No Victor, No Vanquished”, deteriorating material conditions, perceptions of inequality, injustice, historical grievances, and persecution have shaped the continuity of separatist grievances (Alumona, Azom & Iloh, 2017: 3). A strong sense of marginalisation in the political-administrative arena prevails there, as it is, for example, the region that receives the least federal resources in the country. Consequently, some of the longstanding demands reiterate the call for an Igbo presidency at the national level, the revision of the southeast’s territorial administrative division —the creation of an additional state would allow it to get further resources from the federation⁹⁷—, improved public investment, or ensuring the security of the Igbo people and their property in the rest of the country (Oyewole, 2019: 7-8).

The resurgence of demands for self-determination and the creation of the Eastern Security Network

In this context, demands for self-determination have resurfaced in Biafra, first with the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), created in 1999 and led by Ralph Uwazuruike, and then by a myriad of secessionist movements of different kinds, partly due to splits within MASSOB⁹⁸, including the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the group created in 2012 by London-based propaganda organisation Radio Biafra director Nnamdi Nwannekaenyi Kanu.

Since 2015, IPOB has become a reference organisation, supported by the particular charisma of its leader and rallying a constituency of young people who see their discontent with economic disempowerment and political marginalisation channelled through it. Both organisations, MASSOB and IPOB, share the goal of independence, although they differ in discourse and methods. MASSOB has vowed the use of non-violent means, through civil disobedience actions, marches, peaceful protests, and propaganda actions, such as the use of the Biafran flag or the issuing of its own currency (2005) and passport (2009). IPOB, despite also advocating non-violent actions in its discourses, has seen its members employ confrontational strategies at times; the group and particularly its

96 Biafra is an area mainly inhabited by the Igbo people, located in southeastern Nigeria, comprising Abia, Imo, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Anambara states, and representing about 18% of the country’s population. The Republic of Biafra was declared on 30 May 1967 by Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and was recognised by four African states: Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Tanzania, and Zambia.

97 Nigeria is divided into 6 geopolitical zones, each made up of 6 or 7 states, except for the southeast, which is made up of 5. This reduces the number of local governments there —the southeast region accounts for only 96 of the country’s 774. Representation in government and allocation of federal revenue is based on the number of states and local governments, which is why the southeast receives a smaller amount. African Arguments, “Nigeria: How to solve a problem like Biafra”, 29 May 2017. <https://africanarguments.org/2017/05/29/nigeria-how-to-solve-a-problem-like-biafra/>.

98 Among them, the Biafra Independent Movement (BIM), the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), the Biafran Liberation Council (BLC), the Igbo Youth Cultural and Restoration Initiative (IYCR), the Eastern People Congress (EPC), etc. Nevertheless, internal disputes have prevented the emergence of a unified front (Oyewole, 2019: 1-23).

leader Kanu have been accused of using a more violent approach and rhetoric (Alumona, Azom & Iloh, 2017: 14; Andangor, 2018).

The resumption of tensions in Biafra occurred in late 2015, following the rise to power of President Muhammadu Buhari, who was perceived as a threat in southern regions as he was seen as favouring his northern constituents⁹⁹. In response, since September authorities began referring to IPOB's activities as threats to national security. On 14 October, Nnamdi Kanu was arrested and jailed on charges of sedition, incitement to ethnic hatred, and treason. This led to a significant increase in mobilisations, which were violently repressed by the Nigerian Security Forces (NSF). The most significant event took place on 30 May 2016, when the NSF opened live fire on a demonstration. At least 60 people were killed and 70 others were injured. Overall, the NSF waged a campaign of violence and extrajudicial killings against the pro-Biafra movement that cost the lives of at least 150 peaceful protesters between August 2015 and August 2016 (AI, 2016: 6). Such violence has served as a catalyst for the militant mobilisation of Biafran youths (Duerksen, 2021: 6-7).

Kanu was released on 28 April 2017 after 18 months in detention, and he disappeared in September after the army raided his house during the Python Dance II military operation, which resulted in the deaths of 150 people. Following the operation, the Federal High Court in Abuja proscribed IPOB, designating it a terrorist group (EASO, 2018: 82-83).

While the NSF crackdown appeared to significantly reduce the activities of the secessionist movements, August 2020 marked the beginning of a new escalation of violence following the killing of 21 people by the NSF during an IPOB meeting. In December 2020, IPOB announced the creation of a paramilitary wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), officially aimed at protecting the Igbo community from armed attacks by Fulani herdsmen¹⁰⁰, in the face of government inaction¹⁰¹. Since then, tensions and violence have increased again throughout 2021. One of the most notable armed clashes was the Orlu (Imo State) crisis in January 2021, which included attacks on civilians by the NSF and the displacement of dozens of people. The fighting ceased with Kanu's declaration of a ceasefire at the end of the month, and the reported withdrawal of the NSF¹⁰². However, the ESN's relationship with the NSF has remained tense, and mutual accusations of attacks have been constant¹⁰³. The state holds the ESN responsible for any violent events in the region, especially attacks on public infrastructure such as police stations and prisons, or the killing of members of security staff; for its part, the ESN denounces the campaign of criminalisation, targeted attacks on its members and on the civilian population, and insists that its mission is to protect locals against armed herdsmen. In this context, Amnesty International has denounced the arrest of more than 500 people and the killings of at least 115 people between March and June 2021 alone at the hands of the NSF, in a response described as a "catalogue of human rights violations and crimes under international law", as well as a crackdown that began in January that has included arbitrary mass arrests, excessive use of force, torture, and other ill-treatment¹⁰⁴.

99 In the 2015 election, former President Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015) received 91% of the total votes in the south and southeast regions.

100 Tensions between pastoralist —often nomadic— and agriculturalist —sedentary— population groups are not new in Nigeria or, more generally, on the African continent, and have to do with issues outside the scope of this report, such as the configuration of territory and the pattern of post-colonial states. In this case, the need for access to land and water may be the cause of these attacks, which were already taking place in the central belt of the country, moving southwards. They are often intertwined with interpretations along religious or ethnic lines —Muslim-majority Fulani herdsmen in tension with mostly Christian Igbo farmers.

101 Campbell, John, "Security Deteriorating in Nigeria's Former Biafra", Council on Foreign Relations, 9 February 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/security-deteriorating-nigerias-former-biafra>

102 Seun Opejobi, "Orlu: Nnamdi Kanu orders ESN to cease fire against Army, watchful of Fulani herdsmen", Daily Post, 28 January 2021. <https://dailypost.ng/2021/01/28/orlu-nnamdi-kanu-orders-esn-to-ceasefire-against-army-watchful-of-fulani-herdsmen/>

103 A few examples: on 18 February security forces carried out an air strike in Orlu, after which the IPOB spoke of "the beginning of Biafra War II"; in March the NSF attacked an ESN camp, and carried out arbitrary arrests of civilians; in early April the Oweri prison, also in Imo State, was attacked, although the ENS denied its involvement.

104 Amnesty International, "Nigeria: At least 115 people killed by security forces in four months in country's southeast", 5 August 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/nigeria-at-least-115-people-killed-by-security-forces-in-four-months-in-countrys-southeast/>

In this atmosphere, the government announced in June 2021 that Kanu had been arrested and extradited to Nigeria to stand trial on 11 charges, including treason, a development that has again stirred up the region¹⁰⁵. His trial has been postponed to 21 October 2021.

At the regional level, it is worth noting that in April 2021 the leaders of IPOB and the Governing Council of Ambazonia in Cameroon —who are waging an armed conflict against the Cameroonian government over the independence of the country’s Anglophone regions¹⁰⁶— announced a formal alliance, the potential of which to provoke further instability regionally and in both countries has yet to be analysed¹⁰⁷.

The criminalisation of pro-Biafra movements and human rights violations

Pro-Biafra civil movements have historically been criminalised by the Nigerian authorities. In 2005, Human Rights Watch stated that while “there is no law proscribing MASSOB, the federal government has declared membership of the organization illegal on the grounds that they constitute a threat to the security and sovereignty of the nation” (HRW, 2005). Subsequently, in 2013, then president Goodluck Jonathan singled it out as one of the three “extremist groups that threaten national security” (EASO, 2018: 81). Over time, the NSF has violently repressed MASSOB’s actions, arresting members —in 2005 its leader and 11 others were imprisoned on treason charges— and banning the use of the Biafran flag or currency, on charges of sedition or treason (EASO, 2018: 82).

In the case of IPOB, the federal government has gone further. On 21 September 2017, the Federal High Court in Abuja declared IPOB a terrorist organisation *ex parte*, based on the Terrorism (Prevention) Act (2011) and its 2013 amendment. The declaration entails the outlawing of all its activities; the act’s deliberately broad wording is a matter of concern, as it covers “any person or group of persons participating in any manner whatsoever in any form of activities involving or concerning the prosecution of the collective intentions or otherwise of the said groups,” including possession of the organisation’s material¹⁰⁸.

Enforcement of the anti-terrorism law has resulted in increased repression, serving as a cover for the violation of fundamental rights and freedoms such as the freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression, non-discrimination, and respect for the rights of minorities. Nigeria ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 2003. However, the vague, excessive and arbitrary application of this designation might have committed, according to the group of five Special Rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council (OHCHR, Communication JAL NGA 5/2020)¹⁰⁹, a violation of Articles 6 —right to life—, 9 —freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention—, 18 —freedom of thought, conscience, religion—, 19 —freedom of opinion and expression—, 21 and 22 —peaceful assembly and association—, 26 —equality without discrimination before the law—, and 27 —minority rights. They therefore warn the government “against the use of counter-terrorism

105 <https://radiobiafra.co/breaking-news-mazi-nnamdi-kanu-ipob-leader-rearrested-lawyer>

106 Please refer to the relevant chapter on the case study of Ambazonia within this report.

107 Craig, Jess, “Separatist Movements in Nigeria and Cameroon Are Joining Forces”, *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/20/separatists-nigeria-cameroon-biafra-ipob-ambazonia-anglophone-joining-forces/>

108 Terrorism (Prevention) (Proscription Order) Notice, 2017, Government Notice No. 85, Volume 104, Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette, 20 September 2017.

109 The Communication JAL NGA 5/2020 of 1 October 2020 was signed by five Special Rapporteurs —on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression; on the rights to peaceful assembly and association; and on the rights of minorities—, and is a key source as a compilation of those human rights violations. Specific references to international human rights law are not further elaborated in this text because of limited length, but can be found in its bibliography.

rhetoric and regulation directed at activities and speech which do not legitimately fall within this category” since “pursuing minority rights protection or the recognition of the existence of a minority for instance, or even calls for self-determination do not on their own amount to terrorist activities”, and therefore “the alleged acts of illegality and violence committed by IPOB or its members could have been addressed in accordance with the provisions of conventional criminal laws, in line with international law, without invoking the application of counter- terrorism legislation” (OHCHR, JAL Communication NGA 5/2020: 7-8). On her part, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has also denounced arbitrary detentions, torture and executions after having received a large number of allegations of killings of IPOB members by the NSF and their lack of investigation by the authorities (OHCHR, 2019)¹¹⁰.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) declared in March 2018 —following an IPOB’s complaint— that the group’s banning as a terrorist organisation and the attacks against its members are a *prima facie* violation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, ratified by Nigeria since 1983, specifying that it “constitutes a gross violation of Articles 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 19, 20” and recalling the need for counter-terrorism measures adopted to comply in any case with the obligations to respect human rights under the Charter and other international human rights treaties, in accordance with the resolution on the Protection of human rights and the rule of law in the fight against Terrorism (ACHPR, 2017, communication 680/17).

The International Criminal Court, as a party in several open cases in Nigeria, is currently assessing the one concerning NSF actions against protesters in the course of 2017 events (ICC, 2019: 47-52).

Final conclusions

In the face of the allegations of human rights violations committed by the NSF, the Nigerian government has not responded to the ACHPR’s interpellations —which demanded the implementation of interim measures and refrain from further action (decision to Communication 680, February 2018)— or to the communications by the OHCHR, which point out the non-compliance with international human rights obligations. Of particular concern is the use and abuse of counter-terrorism legislation, the violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms carried out under its cover, as well as the excessive power that the aforementioned legislation confers on the president, with no apparent due process of control and transparency. The government has also failed in its obligations to carry out a due process of investigation into alleged abuses and killings by the NSF. The aforementioned criminalisation and escalation of violence in IPOB-affiliated areas risks radicalising the population and strengthening support for IPOB, as well as the possible recruitment of youths into armed action¹¹¹. This, in an overall national context in which the multiplicity of dire scenarios —Northeast, Middle Belt, Niger Delta...— increases the state’s inability to deal with these security challenges, increases the number of human rights violations, and contributes to a sense of grievance, partisanship and impunity.

110 OHCHR, “End of visit statement of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions on her visit to Nigeria” (para 11 & 14), 2 September 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24934&LangID=E> Reports from various agencies, such as those introduced by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT, 2018), the European Asylum Support Office (EASO, 2018), Amnesty International (2016), the UK Home Office (2020) or Global Rights (2020) coincide in these assessments.

111 It should also be noted that other paramilitary “protection” groups are active in the country with similar stated goals, which nevertheless enjoy government tolerance.

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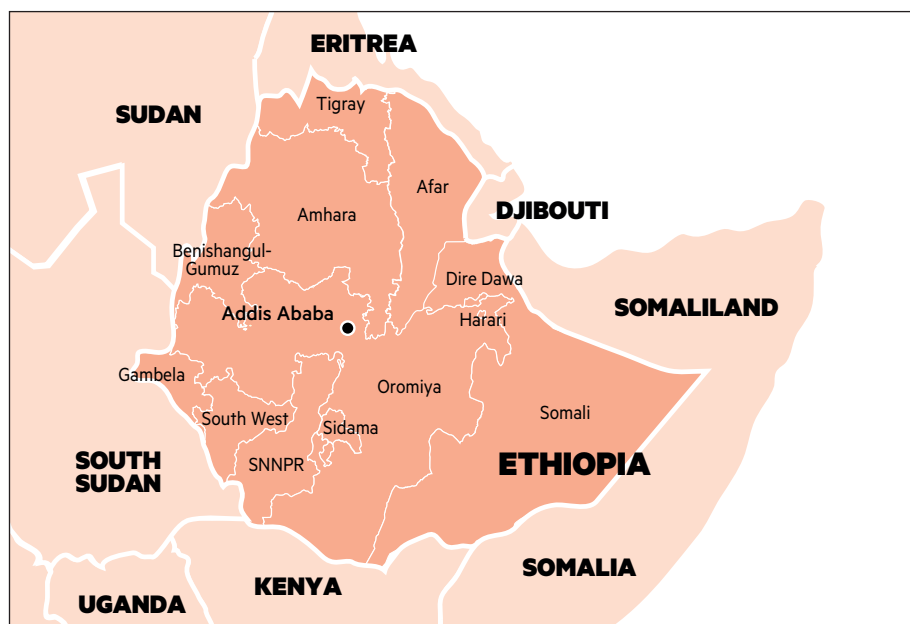
Ethiopia: human rights violation and conflict in Tigray

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Presentation

Abiy Ahmed's appointment as Ethiopia's new prime minister in early 2018 led to important and positive domestic and regional changes in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, including the September 2018 Eritrea- Ethiopia peace agreement. Domestically, Abiy lifted the state of emergency in the country, ordered the release of thousands of prisoners, allowed dissident sectors to return to the country, and led to greater freedom of expression by facilitating the creation of new parties and the unblocking of hundreds of websites and media outlets. He reached peace agreements with insurgents in Oromiya and Ogaden, and initiated a process of state reform. His actions won him domestic and international praise, which culminated in the award of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

However, Abiy Ahmed's actions aimed at reforming the Ethiopian state also led to its weakening. They have given new impetus to ethnically-based nationalist movements that re-emerged during the mass mobilisations initiated in 2015 by the Oromo community that brought him to power, as well as they have met strong resis-



tance from key actors such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), once the main party of the alliance that had ruled Ethiopia since 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which had established the system of ethnic federalism. The leaders of the Tigrayan community perceived a loss of power and privilege in the changes enacted by Abiy Ahmed. Tensions intensified under Abiy Ahmed's liberalising reforms. As the EPRDF reduced its tight control, new opportunities, grievances, and discourses emerged from regional leaders and civil society actors alike. This situation has triggered an escalation of political violence across the country and increased tension between the federal government and the TPLF, culminating in the outbreak of an armed conflict between the Ethiopian security forces supported by neighbouring Eritrea and the Tigray region's security forces, in which all parties involved are responsible for serious human rights violations.

Background and other axes of tension and conflict

When the EPRDF ruling coalition established the system of ethnic federalism after coming to power in 1991, it sought to balance the demands of more than 90 ethnic groups, many of which were organised in armed nationalist movements. Ethnic federalism, which divided Ethiopia into nine semi-autonomous states and two multi-ethnic cities, gave larger ethnic groups a greater degree of self-rule, and offered recognition and more reduced levels of autonomy to smaller groups. However, three decades on, the system that was once designed to bring together a multi-ethnic nation is now, according to various analyses, contributing to its implosion. It has sown political dysfunction, as ordinary tasks of governance have become spaces of ethnic competition and conflict. The delimitation of administrative boundaries, the allocation of state resources, the organisation of the census, and the holding of elections in 2020 that were eventually postponed and held in June 2021 (with an overwhelming victory for the Prosperity Party, PP, created by Abiy Ahmed from the EPRDF coalition, which the TPLF refused to join) in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic are a source of growing tension.¹¹²

Areas most affected by inter-communal violence are the three northern states (Amhara, Tigray, and Afar) and centre-southern Oromiya. Of particular note in June 2019 were the killings of senior government officials in Amhara, which were described as a coup attempt against the region. The federal government took action to bring the situation under control, and carried out repressive actions against the Amhara political opposition. The June 2019 arrest of several Abiy Ahmed's critics, such as activist and opposition leader Jawar Mohammed—a member of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) opposition party, who had been one of the architects of the protests that helped bring Abiy to power in 2018 and one of the intellectuals of the main Oromo youth association *Qeerroo*—and journalist Eskinder Nega during the protests over the killing of singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa, reflect this. Hundessa's death on 29 June sparked major mobilisations and protests in Addis Ababa and Oromiya, in which clashes between security forces and Oromo youth groups, as well as attacks by members of the Oromo community against other minorities, killed more than 200 people between 30 June and 2 July. HRW denounced the arrest of more than 9,000 political opponents, activists and journalists, an internet ban, and the deployment of the army in the capital. Moreover, exceptional measures taken by the government in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic also led to the excessive use of force and to the suppression of protests and social movements, resulting in several deaths in 2020.¹¹³

Several axis of division and conflict exist.¹¹⁴ Chief among them is the one affecting Oromiya, Abiy's home state, where the PM's rivals, and some of his former allies, believe he should be doing more to promote their interests. Another axis of division pits Oromo community leaders against those in Amhara state, Ethiopia's second

112 Woldemikael, Olivia, "Ethiopia: Beyond ethnic federalism", *African Arguments*, 9 December 2019.

113 Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Stop the use of deadly force on protesters", AI, 14 August 2020.

114 International Crisis Group, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, n. 283/Africa, 16 December 2019.

most populous, whose leaders question Oromiya's growing influence over the government as well as over the multi-ethnic capital Addis Ababa. A third axis of division pits the states of Tigray and Amhara against each other over two territories —Gichew and Gobe— which Amhara claims Tigray illegitimately annexed in the early 1990s. Another issue is the exclusion of large swathes of the population from the so-called Ethiopian economic miracle, which further inflames the situation. Adding to this is the debate over the ethnic federalist system. Introduced in 1991 after the Tigray-led revolutionary government took power, the system devolves authority to ethnolinguistically-defined regions, while dividing central power among the ruling parties in those regions. Proponents of such system point to the violent pre-1991 history of a coercive central government, and argue that ethnic federalism protects the rights of different ethno-linguistic communities in a diverse country. Critics argue that because the system structures the state along ethnic lines, it undermines national unity, fuels ethnic conflict, and leaves minorities in regions dominated by major ethnic groups vulnerable. This debate was highlighted in the 2019 referendum by the Sidama community —4 per cent of the country's population, the fifth largest national community— which became the tenth state of the federation in 2020 after seceding from the SNNPR state, a fact that may spur other communities (Wolayta, Hadiya, Gurage, Keffa, among others) to seek their own state, which may lead to new sources of tension.

Since Abiy Ahmed's rise to power, the TPLF and the leaders of the Tigrayan community —once the hard core of the EPRDF coalition— have seen their power over government decision-making eroded. In parallel, the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict was rooted in border disputes between the two countries, with the epicentre in the town of Badme, the status of which remains unresolved. Tigray, as a border state where decisions relating to the Eritrea-Ethiopia agreement —such as border demarcation and the status of Badme— have to be implemented, was marginalised from the peace process between the two governments. However, the turning point came in June 2020 following the federal government's announcement to postpone the regional and federal elections, due to be held in August, because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Tigray regional parliament decided to hold the election anyway in September, which was deemed unconstitutional by the federal authorities. On 5 October, the TPLF withdrew its parliamentarians from the federal government, whose mandate was due to expire in October; this was followed by a breakdown in relations and the diversion of federal funds originally intended for Tigray. On 4 November, the Ethiopian government announced that it was launching a military offensive in response to the attack on two federal military bases in Tigray.¹¹⁵

Human rights violations in the context of the armed conflict

The offensive in Tigray has led to heavy fighting between the two sides and an escalation of the conflict that has resulted in thousands killed, hundreds of thousands forcibly displaced, and some 120,000 seeking refuge in neighbouring Sudan to escape violence.¹¹⁶

The conflict has taken on regional dimensions due to Eritrean involvement in support of the Ethiopian government as well as attacks by the TPLF in neighbouring Amhara and the involvement of security forces and militias in the region. Instability has spread to the border states of Amhara and Afar. Human rights organisations have documented serious human rights violations, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. To date, the armed conflict in Tigray has displaced 2 million people and has caused a major humanitarian crisis in the region. USAID estimated in June that around 900,000 people in Tigray —the region's population totals 6 million— are facing famine-like conditions, pointing to it as the worst crisis today. The UN estimated that more than 400,000 people are suffering famine, with another 1.8 million people on the brink of it. At the same time, the UN reported

115 Burke, Jason, "Fighting reported in Ethiopia after PM responds to 'attack' by regional ruling party", *The Guardian*, 4 November 2020.

116 UNHCR, *Ethiopia Situation (Tigray Region)* 1-15 August 2021, 15 August 2021.

that 5.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, the vast majority of them women and children, with humanitarian access in the region being restricted.¹¹⁷

The worsening humanitarian situation prompted the UN Security Council to hold its first public meeting on the conflict, days after the TPLF retook control of the regional capital Mekelle, on 27 June. In parallel, in an unexpected turn of events, the Federal Government declared a unilateral ceasefire on 28 June and announced the withdrawal of army troops from the region. The move marks the first cessation of hostilities since the start of the armed conflict 8 months earlier. The TPLF responded to the ceasefire by arresting and displaying around 7,000 army troops in the streets of Mekelle, as well as demanding different conditions from the government to join the ceasefire.¹¹⁸

Serious human rights violations have been found that could be considered war crimes and crimes against humanity by all actors involved in the conflict. Initial investigations in November 2020 revealed the commission of mass executions of civilians in Mai-Kadra (south-west of Tigray) under TPLF responsibility.¹¹⁹

The same month, Eritrean troops reportedly extrajudicially executed hundreds of civilians in Aksum.¹²⁰ In January, Amnesty International in cooperation with CNN confirmed that the Ethiopian army committed extrajudicial executions against civilians in Mahibere Dego, near Axum. The Ethiopian government has blocked access and has silenced communications in the region since November. Since access to Tigray was allowed in late February, international media and human rights organisations have reported and confirmed serious atrocities, including the use of sexual violence by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops.¹²¹ In August, Amnesty International reported widespread rape and other sexual violence by pro-Ethiopian government fighting forces, including the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies, the Amhara Region Special Police, as well as Fano, an Amhara militia.¹²²

Rape and sexual violence have been used as a weapon of war to inflict persistent physical and psychological harm on women and girls in Tigray, with the aim of degrading and dehumanising them, according to Amnesty International. Medical centres in Tigray recorded 1,288 cases of gender-based violence between February and April 2021. This figure is only a fraction of the violations committed, as many victims had not gone to any medical centre, according to Amnesty International's witnesses. It should be added that witnesses have been collected from medical sources on cases of sexual slavery and captivity as well as multiple rapes at the hands of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers.¹²³ This also includes acts of ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans¹²⁴ in western Tigray, an area that fell under the control of the Amhara region police and the Amhara Fano militia. In addition, arbitrary arrests and detentions, executions, and discrimination and stigmatisation of members of the Tigrayan community were reported throughout the country.

In July, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution calling for an immediate end to all human rights violations in Tigray, compliance with International Humanitarian Law, as well as the verifiable withdrawal of Eritrean

117 AP, "Up to 900,000 in Ethiopia's Tigray Face Famine, US Says", AP, 26 de junio de 2021; Al Jazeera, "Over 400,000 in Tigray Suffering Famine Now, with 1.8m on Brink", Al Jazeera, 3 July 2021.

118 The East African, "TPLF gives five conditions for ceasefire, wants transition process", The East African, 31 July 2021.

119 Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state", AI, 12 November 2020.

120 Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Eritrean troops' massacre of hundreds of Axum civilians may amount to crime against humanity", AI, 26 February 2021.

121 Véase BBC, "Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: 'I lost my hand when a soldier tried to rape me'", 15 de febrero de 2021; Feleke, Bethlehem; Mackintosh, Eliza; Mezzofiore, Gianluca; Polglase, Katie; Elbagir, Nima; Arvanitidis, Barbara and Platt, Alex, "Practically this has been a genocide", CNN, 22 March 2021; Kassa, Lucy, "'A Tigrayan womb should never give birth': Rape in Tigray", Al Jazeera, 21 April 2021.

122 Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: 'I don't know if they realized I was a person': Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia", AI, 11 August 2021.

123 Al Jazeera, "Top Ethiopia health official alleges 'sexual slavery' in Tigray", Al Jazeera, 15 April 2021.

124 Walsh, Declan, "Ethiopia's War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says", NYT, 26 February 2021.

troops.¹²⁵ The African Union also launched an investigation into human rights violations in the area in July. The resolutions and criticisms of human rights violations come in a context where humanitarian organisations continue to be targeted.¹²⁶

125 Consejo de Derechos Humanos de la ONU, Resolución sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en la región de Tigré de Etiopía, A/HRC/47/L.20/Rev.1, 13 July 2021.

126 Ahmed, Kamil, "Three AID Workers Found Dead in Tigray, Says Médecins Sans Frontières", The Guardian, 25 June 2021.

Report on human rights violations in Western Sahara

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Presentation

For more than four decades, activists and journalists under Moroccan occupation in Western Sahara have suffered mistreatment, surveillance, raids, arrests, torture and forced disappearances for the fact of being Sahrawis and defending their rights. In 1975, the Spanish State, administering power of Western Sahara, decided to leave what was its province number 53¹²⁷ to its fate, signing hidden and illegitimate¹²⁸ documents, the Madrid Tripartite Agreements, in which it transferred the administration of the territory to the Kingdom of Morocco and to Mauritania.



127 In 1960, the UN [Resolution 1514 of the General Assembly of the United Nations] ruled that the Sahrawi people, like any other people subject to colonial rule, had the right to establish themselves as an independent state.

128 The Madrid Tripartite Agreements are not recognized by public International Law. By virtue of various United Nations resolutions [1514 (XV) of 1960, 1541 (XV) of 1960 or 2625 (XXV) of 1970] the future of the Non-Self-Governing Territories can only be decided through a process of free determination among its inhabitants who, through a vote, can establish what type of sovereignty they want for their territory, including the possibility of independence.

In 1976, Spain promised to carry out a decolonization process that never culminated, allowing Morocco to occupy the Sahara with total impunity. The same year, more than 160,000 Sahrawis fled on foot through the desert¹²⁹ while the Polisario Front¹³⁰ proclaimed the creation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in the liberated territories.¹³¹ In 1979, Mauritania abandoned its claims to the Sahrawi territory, and Morocco took the opportunity to restate its occupation, settle down, repress the natives and plunder their natural resources. Thus began a harsh warlike conflict. In 1991, MINURSO¹³² was born after an agreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front, with the aim of preparing the holding of a referendum in which the people of Western Sahara could choose between independence or integration into Morocco. Today, the Sahrawis are still waiting for that plebiscite that never came.

The facts after Guerguerat

Despite decades of repression, the date of November 13, 2020 marked a before and after in Western Saharan human rights violations. That day, at the Guerguerat border crossing in southern Western Sahara, Morocco broke the ceasefire agreement that it had signed with the Polisario Front in 1991. Since then, activists and journalists living in occupied Western Sahara have denounced the military and police state where they live.

“Since November, when the war began after the break of the ceasefire by Morocco, the repression against the Sahrawis has increased greatly. We have experienced a lot of military and police deployment. There have been house searches and constant surveillance. Between the end of November and the beginning of December 2020, there were more than 100 arrests of Sahrawis, including minors for participating in demonstrations.” Ahmed Ettanji is 33 years old. He is a journalist and will present his experiences and his knowledge, ad hoc, throughout this report. He lives in his hometown Laayoune, the capital of occupied Western Sahara. He is part of the Equipe Media group of journalists, “an independent organization that focuses on making visible what is happening in occupied Western Sahara”, as described by its members. It is made up of about 30 people. Since 2009 they have written articles and reports in English, French, Arabic and Spanish to show the world what the reality Sahrawis are experiencing is. The demonstrations which Ettanji refers to are mobilizations supported by young people in denouncing the breaking of the ceasefire. “The justice of the occupation is passing very serious and very high sentences against young people. We are talking about boys between 17 and 28 years old who have committed common crimes, such as fights, petty theft or smoking joints, and have been sentenced to 20 and 30 years in prison for being Sahrawi,” Ettanji acknowledges.

129 Sahrawis fled on foot through the desert while being bombarded with napalm and white phosphorous. They crossed the Algerian border and temporarily settled in Tindouf in various refugee camps that they built with their own hands. More than forty years later, they are still waiting to be able to return to Western Sahara.

130 The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguía el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) was born in 1973. It is the Movement for the Liberation of the Sahara's successor, led by Mohamed Sidi Brahim Basir in the late 1960s. He disappeared by the Spanish territorial police's hands in an insurrection in 1970 in Laayoune, in which several Sahrawis were killed by the Spanish Legion during the Franco dictatorship. Several groups of Sahrawis formed the Polisario Front in Mauritania on May 10, 1973 with the purpose of achieving independence from the Spanish colonial rule.

131 The liberated territories are located in the eastern fringe of Western Sahara. These are areas controlled by the Polisario Front that Morocco was never able to occupy. They are to the east of the wall of shame that Morocco began to build in the 1980s, and which measures more than 2,700 km, with the intention of dividing Western Sahara in two and stopping the entry of Sahrawis into the occupied territories. In Bir Lehlu, the capital of the liberated territories, the SADR proclamation was signed in 1976.

132 MINURSO means The United Nations Mission for the Western Sahara referendum.

Worsening Conditions for Political Prisoners: the Case of Gdeim Izik

“It reminds us of what happened in 2010, and the current situation seems even worse,” Nazha Elkhaldi, an Equipe Media’s journalist in Laayoune, told Spanish news site Público.es in February 2021. The Moroccan authorities razed in 2010 the Sahrawi camp in Gdeim Izik, a few kilometers from Laayoune, accounting for about 20 deaths and hundreds of wounded and missing. After that, the cities of Western Sahara became a prison for Sahrawi activists and journalists, as it is happening now. About a year after Morocco broke the ceasefire in Guerguerat, 19 of 23 Sahrawis imprisoned in 2010 for defending the resistance camp today continue to serve unjust and disproportionate sentences in Moroccan prisons. One of them is journalist Mohamed Lamin Haddi. “His family has reported that they have not heard from him for more than three months, not even his whereabouts. With the breaking of the ceasefire, the situation of the Sahrawi political prisoners has worsened,” Ettanji says. The same group of journalists Equipe Media, which collaborates whenever they can with Spanish media, denounced in February and March 2021 to another news site El Salto the anguishing situation that Lamin Haddi’s family was experiencing, and reported on the hunger strike that his jailed compatriots supported: “For the third time in 2021, all the prisoners of the Gdeim Izik Group who are in Moroccan prisons went on a 48-hour warning hunger strike, in solidarity with the imprisoned journalist Mohamed Lamin Haddi.”

The Sahrawi prisoners of Gdeim Izik carry bulky and disproportionate sentences (nine life sentences, three of 30 years, five of 25, three of 20 and four of 10) after being tried in processes lacking proportionality, legal content and procedural guarantees.

This was also stated by Cadena SER’s Morocco-based correspondent Sonia Moreno in March 2021: “From that group of Gdeim Izik, journalist Lamin Haddi is in danger. He was arrested 11 years ago and sentenced to 25 years by the military court in unfair trials, according to observers and international organizations, including Reporters Without Borders in Spain.”

In May 2021, Ingrid Mitton, a lawyer for the prisoners of the Gdeim Izik Group, pointed out in a digital seminar on political prisoners in Morocco, as reported by Contrainformacion.es, that her clients “have been the object of reprisals by the security services and the judges, who act according to instructions that come to them from the upper echelons of Rabat, resorting to despicable and unworthy methods.” She also stated that “the court has added false evidence to the prosecution’s case, as is currently the case with detained journalists, whose lives are at risk due to their multiple illnesses and circumstances.”

Ahmed Ettanji also does not want to ignore the case of Yahya Hafed Laaza, “who has been in prison for 15 years, was missing for many months, and appeared in a prison very far from the Sahara, at Safi, and now he is on a hunger strike,” he states. According to Sahrawi agency SPS, the reasons why Laaza began the fast include the “aggressive and illegal practices to which he was subjected during his stay in the local prison of Buzgaren, committed by the director of the prison” such as deprivation of his right to telephone calls, daily leisure, or family visits, as well as “deliberate medical negligence that required his urgent transfer, more than once, to the hospital for treatment.”

Harassment and demolition of activists under the Covid pandemic

To justify the increased repression, the Moroccan authorities have used “the restrictions against the spread of the Covid pandemic to pressure and limit the movement of activists, or of Sahrawis in general, in the occupied are-

as,” says Ettanji. An example of this situation has been experienced in first person by Sahrawi activist and literary author Aminetu Haidar¹³³. On November 18, 2020 she had planned a flight from the Sahrawi capital to Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in Spain. According to her own statements collected by Spanish news outlets EFE and La Vanguardia, she was not allowed to travel because she was the “only passenger who has been asked for a PCR test, knowing that the regulations did not come into force until November 23,” five days after her flight.

Raids and looting of Sahrawi homes have been documented by several media and journalists such as Sonia Moreno who, in November 2020, during the first days after the ceasefire broke, published in Spanish news site El-diario.es that police pressure and the military were spreading in the occupied territories, throughout all “Sahrawi cities, where raids and arrests of civilians are taking place.”

The same correspondent, in March 2021, stated on Cadena SER that they were documenting “attacks on journalists, house arrests and constant surveillance of the Sahrawi population. And with a change of treatment, more repressive and aggressive, since November 13, 2020.”

The slaughterous case of Sultana Khaya

According to Ettanji, in June and July 2021 “arrests against journalists and activists have continued and they have even raided houses such as Sultana Khaya’s, who has been attacked and raped, and the Sahrawi companions who accompanied her were kidnapped and fired in the desert north of Bojador about 100 km far or more.” The case of Khaya and her family is a clear example of the atrocities that the Moroccan authorities are willing to commit, with total impunity, if Sahrawis in occupied territories do not submit to their dictatorship. Khaya is the president of the Sahrawi League for the Defense of Human Rights and Against the Exploitation of Natural Resources. In November 2020, Khaya was in Alicante, Spain, receiving ophthalmological treatment after in 2007, while studying French in the Moroccan city of Agadir, she attended a demonstration in defense of fellow Sahrawis who were being attacked and lost an eye in the hands of the Alawite police because of a brutal beating.

When Morocco broke the ceasefire, Khaya decided to return to her hometown (and her habitual residence) Bojador, in the occupied territory, where she experienced a new torture and the start of her private prison. Not only for her but also for her mother and her sisters. Upon arriving in Bojador, on November 19, 2020, the Moroccan authorities prevented her from receiving visits and forced her, without a court order, to lock herself at home. More than 10 months have gone since police officers and members of the Moroccan secret service have watched her house 24 hours per day. “I live in a prison”, Khaya told Público.es in February 2021. Every time she or her family try to get out of it, the agents block the door. They enter her house at dawn, assaulting them or throwing garbage and fuel into the home. From her private prison, Khaya has spent hundreds of days denouncing her house arrest to the international community through her mobile phone.

When it seemed that the situation could not get worse, in May 2021, Equipe Media published a video on their social networks in which Khaya denounced: “They have raped us with sticks, they hit me all over the body, kicking and hitting this eye, they covered my mouth, I couldn’t breathe, they grabbed my hands.” This inhumane situation has been picked up by numerous journalists¹³⁴ and organizations for the defense of human rights¹³⁵ who

133 Aminatu Haidar was nominated in January 2021 for the Nobel Peace Prize “for her peaceful campaigning towards an independent Western Sahara,” according to Reuters agency, and holds other awards for her defense of Human Rights such as René Cassin Prize in 2011 or the Alternative Nobel Prize for the Right Livelihood Award in 2019. She is also the president of the Sahrawi Instance Against the Moroccan Occupation (ISACOM).

134 EFE, El País, Naiz.eus, Eldiario.es, Telecinco, Pikara Magazine, Cadena SER, SPS, Swiss Info, Público.es, Yucatan.com, Nueva Tribuna, El Faradio, Ctxt.es.

135 Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders, Democracy Now, Human Right Watch, IAJUWS.

have issued reports denouncing the danger undergone by Khaya's family in their own home and calling for the immediate intervention of the UN.¹³⁶

Even so, the Kingdom of Morocco continues to act with total impunity without institutional and international reactions preventing the Moroccan state from continuing to repress, torture and rape Sahrawi women activists in their occupied territory by force. But as Equipe Media journalist Nazha Elkhaldi stated in Catalan news site *Nationalia.info* in July 2020, without a doubt, "Sahrawi women are a pillar of resistance against Moroccan occupation." They have proven it and they will continue doing it.

Journalism in occupied Western Sahara

"At Equipe Media we are covering everything that is happening despite the difficult situation we are facing. We are being persecuted and threatened by the Moroccan secret police because they do not want us to get information. That is why we continue to denounce that our lives are in danger just for the fact of reporting," Ahmed Ettanji emphatically states. The situation of Sahrawi journalists in the occupied territories has worsened since November 2020 but before the break of the ceasefire they were not living an easy situation either. In February 2020, two fellow journalists¹³⁷ from the *Un Micro para el Sahara* association and myself, who is writing this report, decided to travel to Morocco and to occupied Western Sahara posing as tourists. The Moroccan secret service watched and interrogated us, but we managed to avoid it and contact Sahrawi journalists and activists in Laayoune. Among other people, we met journalist Nazha Elkhaldi, who told us that a year earlier, while recording a live video at a demonstration, a group of policemen beat her, stole the phone with which she was recording, and used her personal information to discredit her, publishing private photos on websites belonging to the Moroccan secret service. Months later she was called to appear in front of a judge who accused her of practicing journalism without authorization. She was sentenced to a fine of € 400 to be able to get her phone back. She refused to pay, and she knows that in the future she will suffer retaliation. Fortunately, the video that she recorded was uploaded to Facebook and they could not make a false accusation: "There were very clear videos and they could not accuse me of violence. I had all my evidence and they had none against me. That is why they imposed that sentence on me saying that I was not a journalist," says Elkhaldi. She is the first Sahrawi journalist to receive this penalty.

Plunder of natural resources

On our trip to Laayoune as tourists, every activist and journalist with whom we spoke agreed on a statement: "Our condemnation is to belong to a very rich land."

That is why the Western Sahara Resource Watch was created. It is an organization made up of volunteers from more than 40 countries tracking and denouncing the looting of the natural resources of Western Sahara. It operates from Brussels and considers that "the occupation of Western Sahara will not stop as long as Morocco is allowed to benefit from it." In its annual report, published in April 2021, called "P for Plunder", it details the companies involved in the purchase of a very rich and abundant mineral in Western Sahara: phosphate. This same report states that Morocco's efforts to exploit Western Sahara's resources have received strong support from the international trade and that Moroccan merchandise exports, out of the territory through Guerguerat, are directly

136 Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur HRDs since 2020, has denounced on her social networks and in the media, the violation of the rights of Sultana Khaya as well as the repression exercised by Morocco against human rights defenders in Western Sahara. Nevertheless, the UN has not acted to reverse this situation.

137 Marta Curiel Tirado y Sergio Miguel Fernández López.

related to the resumption of war in the territory in November 2020. This organization also recognizes that the price Morocco obtains from trade could be double of what they have reported in previous years in their reports.

In addition to phosphate, as journalist Eva Landín details in Spanish news site El Plural, Western Sahara is rich in other resources that Morocco trades with, such as fishing, oil, gas, zirconia, iron, uranium, copper, gold and, of course, sand.

Conclusions and recommendations

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Conclusions

With a few exceptions, African states continue to espouse over centralised systems of government, even if international recommendations exist for decentralisation. Such a state of play hampers the development of democracy and popular participation, locally driven development, and the recognition and management of diversity in plural societies. In some cases, this situation is made worse by the legacy of a poorly resolved decolonisation by the former colonial power.

African states show an overall trend (which on the other hand is not much different to what happens in other contexts in the rest of the world) to respond to secessionist demands by either denigrating or ignoring them and their root causes, and afterwards if the dispute gains more tract, by repressing and engaging in military action against them, while at the same time ruling out any sort of talks or subsequent negotiations.

Such a homogeneous response does not seem to be consistent with the fact that secessionist groups are very diverse among themselves, both in their methods (violent, non-violent...) and in what they would be willing to negotiate or reach agreements on, at least in the short term (autonomy pacts, power-sharing, federalism, referendums on self-determination...).

Confronted with secessionist demands and challenges, state authorities continue, as in the past, to prioritise the use of repression and violence, not only against armed groups but also against civil society groups, individuals, and particularly women, including in extreme cases the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Official discourses tend to demonise secessionist demands to the point of grotesqueness, even when they may be based on well-founded grievances, with a worrying prevalence of the notion of national unity as a totem that cannot be discussed or questioned. In such demonisation, accusations of terrorism, not always sufficiently substantiated, have played an important role in recent years.

In addition, in situations of conflict and crisis, state authorities abuse the blackout of communications and, in more extreme cases, the physical closure of entire regions to outside access.

Recommendations

When secessionist demands emerge, state authorities should look deeper into what grievances are feeding the unrest, and engage with relevant actors in the secessionist entity / region in order to find ways to prevent armed conflict.

Confidence-building measures between state authorities and secessionist actors, including if needed the assistance of facilitators or mediators (be them domestic or from other countries) should be explored and prioritised as an additional means to prevent armed conflict.

State authorities and secessionist movements should be open to explore new territorial agreements that could help accommodate demands that enjoy popular support in the entities / regions where the secessionist demands are being put forward.

Lessons should be learnt by state authorities and secessionist movements from the rights and wrongs of former implementations of autonomy or self-determination deals in the African context, in order to maximise the desirable consequences of them and to avoid the undesirable ones, such as prolonged violence or instability.

State authorities should adhere to constitutional arrangements protecting the right to self-determination, where they exist, in a constructive and peaceful manner instead of resorting to military ways.

In prioritising non-military approaches to political conflict solution, non-armed groups should be included in talks and negotiations, such as civil society groups or sector groups such as women, youths, or informal networks wherever relevant.

All armed actors, including the national armies as well as militias or paramilitary groups, should by all means avoid targetting civilians, and most especially should rule out the use of sexual violence against women. Those actors should adhere to the main international instruments on the issue.

State authorities should refrain from categorising as “terrorist” any group or individual espousing secessionist demands, and should ensure as well the right to free, peaceful speech on those demands.

State authorities should investigate alleged abuses by national security forces against groups or individuals in the context of secessionist demands.

African states should consider introducing reforms to their usually over-centralised systems of government, in a way that helps deepen democracy, promote locally driven development, improve the delivery of public services, and promote national integration and peace while recognising diversity.

Where secessionist-related conflicts emerge, foreign actors seeking to be part of the solution should thoroughly analyse each conflict case separately, taking into account historical trajectories and present-day human realities both in the local, national and regional levels.



**ESQUERRA
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