



## Visual Propaganda and (anti-)separatism in the Cameroonian cyberspace: A conceptual perspective on the role of images in the Ambazonia war

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### Abstract

*Although the use of disinformation and propaganda in the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon has been the subject of much debate, very little scholarly attention has been devoted, particularly to the use of images as tools for propaganda in the crisis. The leverage of images as a war strategy or a public diplomacy technique in the crisis is still grossly understudied. To fill this gap in knowledge, the present paper examines how images have been at the center of the information war opposing the separatist and anti-separatist movements in Cameroon, particularly in cyberspace. Using secondary sources, textual analysis, and critical observations, the paper specifically explores cases of manipulated images used by both separatist and nationalist movements in the Ambazonia war. The paper also examines foreign observers' use or treatment of images related to the war to contribute to the socio-political discourse on the Ambazonia Crisis. In line with the above objectives, the paper is divided into three main parts. In the first place, the paper provides a theoretical construction of images, propaganda, and secessionist agitations. In the second place, it examines pro- and anti-secessionist movements' use of images in the Ambazonia war, and in the last place, the paper explores how international organizations have been using images to mediate in the conflict.*

**Keywords:** Ambazonia Crisis, Ambazonia Defence Force, Anglophone Crisis, Propaganda, Secessionism, Separatism,

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since September 9, 2017, Cameroon's<sup>1</sup> North-West and South-West Regions have been brutalised by a secession war popularly called the Ambazonia War, the NOSO war or the Anglophone Crisis (see image in Plate 1). The secession crisis started after a series of demonstrations led by English-speaking teachers were violently repressed by the forces of law and order. The demonstrations were aimed at protesting French domination and a perceived "Francisization" of the English system of education in Cameroon. These demonstrations also followed similar movements initiated by Anglophone lawyers, who, on their own part, protested pro-Francophone "adulterations" of the Common Law system in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions. The brutal repression of the two protests mentioned above engendered waves of expressed frustration among Anglophone communities as well as a series of condemnations across the world. These frustrations culminated in the emergence of both armed separatist groups (notably the Ambazonia Defence Forces and the Southern Cameroon Defence Forces) and pro-secession activists who, since September 2017, have been using various offline and online-based campaigns to push for a separatist agenda in Cameroon. The pro-secessionists have launched a series of violent campaigns for the creation of a breakaway state called Ambazonia, an entity that territorially covers the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon. In response to these separatist campaigns, the Cameroonian government and its allies (anti-secessionist communities) have deployed countermovements to downplay or neutralize the separatist rhetoric and ultimately protect Cameroon's national unity. Thus, since September 2017, Cameroon's cyberspace and media landscape have been the theater of an information war between pro- and anti-separatist activists.



Plate 1: Anglophone Regions of Cameroon.

Source: DW News, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/separatism-in-cameroon-5-years-of-violent-civil-war/a-59369417>

<sup>1</sup> The Republic of Cameroon is a central African country situated at the junction of the Gulf of Guinea. It is bounded on the North by Chad, on the South by Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, on the West by Nigeria and on the East by the Central African Republic. The country is administratively divided into ten regions (Far North, North, Adamawa, East, Centre, South, Littoral, West, South West and North West). Its capital city is Yaoundé. Other major towns of the country include Douala (the economic capital), Bafoussam, Garoua, Bamenda, Kumba and Limbe among others. Cameroon has a population estimated at 18 million inhabitants including Francophone and Anglophone communities. The Anglophone communities amount to 20% of the population and are territorially located in the North-West and South West Regions of the country (BBC World Trust 2010). Thus, Cameroon is a bilingual country as it has adopted English and French as its two official languages. The country equally has over 240 ethnic groups. The most dominant include the Fulani-Hausa, Bamileke, Fan-Beti and Duala.

One key weapon used by both sides to this information war has been (digitally manipulated) images and internet driven activism. In effect, both the separatists and the anti-separatist movements have, at various points, anchored their advocacy, propaganda, and counter-campaigns in (well-doctored or digitally manipulated) images, so much so that the Ambazonia War could rightly be described as an image-driven war, what Winkler and Dauber (2014) call “visual propaganda”. At various points, separatist groups such as the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) as well as pro-secessionist activists have spread gory footage of the Cameroonian army’s raids in various parts of the Anglophone zones. This has been in an attempt to frame the Cameroonian forces of order and the government as an occupation force and a violator of human rights in English-speaking Cameroon. The separatists’ image-based efforts have also sought to paint the Cameroonian government as a cruel and dictatorial force. The ultimate goal of such use of images has been to woo the international community and secure the latter’s support for the separatists’ independence struggle. Armed separatist groups’ propaganda campaigns have also often involved the use of footage of their “successful” military attacks on Cameroon’s army positions and government institutions. The spread of such images has visibly been to achieve two things: suggest their resilience and invincibility and ultimately win the support and admiration of potential sympathizers among Anglophone Cameroonians. The Cameroonian government has deployed similar image-based propaganda to tarnish the image of separatist movements, downplay the claims of the secessionist movements, or protect itself from harmful disinformation campaigns from separatist groups.

Although the use of disinformation and propaganda in the Ambazonia War has been the subject of much heated debate in Cameroon, very little, if any, scholarly attention has been devoted to the use of images as a tool for propaganda in the crisis. The leverage of images as a war strategy or public diplomacy technique in the crisis is still grossly understudied. To fill this gap, the present paper sets out to examine how images have been at the center of the information war opposing pro and anti-separatists in Cameroon, particularly in cyberspace. The paper specifically explores cases of doctored or manipulated images used by both separatist and nationalist movements in the Ambazonia war in a bid to win the support of the international community and give the impression that they are the dominant and victorious party or side in the conflict. The paper also examines foreign observers’ use or treatment of images related to the war to contribute to the socio-political discourse on the Ambazonia Crisis. In line with the above objectives, the paper is divided into four main parts. In the first place, the article provides a theoretical construction of images, propaganda, and secessionist war. In the second place, it examines pro- and anti-secessionist movements’ use of images in the Ambazonia war, and in the last place, it explores how international organizations have been using images to mediate in the conflict.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is based on a descriptive research design. As its name indicates, descriptive research aims at describing the characteristics of the population or phenomenon under study. It focuses principally on the “what” rather than the “why” of the research subject (Manjunatha 2019). It seeks to describe the nature of the demographic segment that is the subject of the research. Rillo and Alieto (2018) explain that this research design is “a purposive process of gathering, analyzing, classifying, and tabulating data about prevailing conditions, practices, processes, trends, and cause-effect relationships and then making adequate and accurate interpretations about such data with or without or sometimes with minimal aid of statistical methods” (p. 169). The authors also observe that the research design “ascertains prevailing conditions of

facts in a group under study that give either qualitative or quantitative, or both, descriptions of the general characteristics of the group as results” (p. 169). In line with this, the present study sought to describe the nature and state of visual propaganda in the online-based activism of both pro- and anti-separatist movements involved in the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon.

Three principal methods of data collection were used in the study: documentary analysis, critical observations, and qualitative content analysis of randomly collected online images. The documentary analysis used in the study consisted of analyzing various types of documents in view of collecting data. Only relevant secondary sources were considered in the study. These sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, working papers, institutional reports, newspaper articles, official government texts, encyclopedias, and online contents, among others. The data collected through this method particularly enabled the author to reach the first objective of the paper. This objective was to provide a theoretical construction of images, propaganda, and the secessionist war. The use of a qualitative content analysis of relevant images related to the Anglophone crisis was key to addressing the second and third objectives of the paper. These second and third objectives included: 1) examining pro- and anti-secessionist movements’ use of images in the Ambazonia war; and 2) exploring how international organizations have been using images to mediate in the conflict.

Data collected through critical observations (the use of the senses to gather data) also helped to gather relevant information for the study. This information was used to buttress different points made in the paper. The various examples of visual propaganda presented in this paper may not, in terms of quantity, be representative of pro- and anti-separatist movements in Cameroon. However, they vividly show how both anti- and pro-separatist movements have manipulatively been deploying images to spread fake news and ultimately sway hearts in favor of their respective causes and worldviews.

## **2.1. Images, Propaganda and Violent Activism Online: A Theoretical Construction**

For years, audiences have regarded photographs as an accurate representation of reality. In his famous essay titled “Camera Lucinda”, Roland Barthes (cited in [Bradburne et al. 2010](#)) claims that there is a referential relationship between photographs and reality. He contends that a photographic image is the result of a chemical-optical impression by which reality is imprinted on a material support in the same way in which it presents itself in front of the camera lens. In tandem with this, photographs have, in popular fantasy, been associated with factual representations or something factual. Media [Reality \(2019\)](#) associates this popular tendency with human psychology. The source notes that “photographs didn’t exist 200,000 years ago. So the older part of our brain can’t tell the difference between a photograph of someone and a real human being”.

It should, however, be underlined that the truth claim of photographs is questionable for at least two reasons. The first reason is that even when they are not the products of digital manipulations, images have, in most cases, represented subtle ways of influencing the human mind. As noted by scholars such as [Bog \(2020\)](#) and [Meyer \(2008\)](#), among others, each image is created by a person who has a specific motive or agenda. In fact, almost every image is a medium through which a person practices gatekeeping and tries to ultimately influence others (viewers). In the media business in particular, images chosen (particularly around high-stakes political issues) are rarely chosen randomly. The images are mostly aimed at influencing

viewers or audiences in a specific way by showing the subject being photographed in an unusual way or situation. [Sontag \(2001\)](#) somewhat underlines this ability of photography to bring to the fore the problematic and unusual things that subtly lead to the misrepresentation of the photographed subject. She writes that “to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. To photograph someone is subliminal murder” (p. 14–15).

The second reason why the truth claim of the photograph should be put to question is the fact that digital photography has seriously diluted, nay, neutralized, the referential relationship between photographs and reality. [Bradbume et al. \(2010\)](#) explain the loss of referential relationships mentioned above. They state that:

*As production, post-production, and distribution are digitized processes, present-day images lack the original reference linking the photograph to the reality out of which it arises. With the disappearance of the negative and film, there is no longer any way of ascertaining the original source of the image. Since this consists simply of digital code, the photograph in the classical and material sense of the term can be regarded as definitively dead and buried. (p.26).*

[Bradbume et al. \(2010\)](#) further contend that the ever-evolving digital techniques of photo manipulation now enable image creators and image users to exhibit the same creative skills and produce the same effects as visual artists. [Bradbume et al. \(2010\)](#) explain that:

*Paradoxically enough, the rules governing the functioning of digital photography are similar to those that characterize painting. While digital tools have made possible operations that we could describe as pictorial, the works produced can hardly be compared to paintings. Photographers today can project their mental images onto the photographic surface without leaving any trace of their intervention. They can make the viewer believe that the image is a reproduction of reality, given that he or she has no way of ascertaining the authenticity of the object represented. The reading, understanding, and interpretation of the image depend totally on the availability of secondary information. (p.26)*

In spite of photography’s contested relationship with reality, people still continue to ascribe much factual value to photographs. Indeed, people tend to ascribe such values even to digital photographs. As [Collins \(2017\)](#) rightly observes, most photographs provide inaccurate representations of truth because of their ability to be manipulated; however, they continue to be regarded as factual in some sense. In line with this, photographs and other forms of visual representation have for centuries been deployed by various categories of organizations as serious instruments for propaganda. Thus, photography has, in various instances, been leveraged to control subjects and audiences in both democracies and authoritarian nations ([Caroll, 2017](#)). This has led to the emergence of such neologisms as “photo-propaganda” (Winter 2022) and “visual propaganda” (Winkler & [Dauber, 2014](#)), among other concepts. Susan [Sontag \(2001\)](#) makes reference to this scenario in her contention that “just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder”. In other words, photography in particular and images in general could be used as political weapons to the detriment of a people.

Throughout history, photography has represented an efficacious weapon for information wars as well as other forms of political propaganda. Examples to illustrate this truism are found in various regions of the world ([Bolt, 2012](#); Jowett & O’Donell, 2011). One such example is Adolf



Hitler's use of photo-based propaganda against the Jews in 1930s Germany. In the guise of attaining an imaginary racial purity in Germany, Hitler's Nazi Party initiated sustained anti-Semitic propaganda that was strongly rooted in the use of visual narratives. Technically, the scheme sought to unite the German population against the Jews. Through this visual propaganda campaign, the German public was bombarded with demeaning images that associated the Jews with rats, filth, parasites, and impurity. The photographs represented Jews as scandalous, uncontrollable, and enemies, among other negativities. An exhibition christened Eternal Jews was even organized in Munich in 1937 with over 265 gloomy images of the Jews. The Eternal Jews exhibition associated the Jews with the Soviet Union and African-Americans, who at the time were considered racially impure. Like many other racist projects, this exhibition seriously dehumanized the Jews and ultimately spurred the German populace to develop and manifest anti-Semitic sentiments. These various forms of photographic propaganda were ultimately aimed at building a subconscious association between Jews and a feeling of disgust (Beale, Boyd, & Coan, 2020; Collins, 2017). According to Burleigh (2000), the Nazi Party's propaganda brought to the fore evidence of the perceived wrongdoing of the Jews. Such propaganda also provoked sentiments of racial superiority among the German people. As Burleigh (2000) puts it, "propaganda encouraged and incited people to entertain thoughts that, under normal circumstances, they might have remained blissfully ignorant of" (p. 88).

Another illustration of photographic propaganda is seen in Franklin D. Roosevelt's image-assisted campaign aimed at advocating his 1933–1939 New Deal Program in the United States of America. Collins (2017) reviews some of the images mobilized by Roosevelt to influence the masses in favor of his program. Collins maintains that various poverty and devastation images were, for the purpose of propaganda, distributed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in rural America to attract support for Roosevelt's economic recovery plan. In like manner, extremist, insurgent, and secessionist groups across the globe have been mobilizing photographic or image-based propaganda in favor of their respective causes. The ubiquity of the Internet and social media has most often enabled these groups' propaganda to be more diffused, more impactful or harmful, and naturally more talked about. In line with this, Winkler and Dauber rightly observe that "cheap and easy access to modernized communication technologies virtually assures continued improvements in global extremist groups' future use of visual media campaigns" (p. 4).

Extremist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Hizbollah, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram every day deploy online images to preach their respective political doctrines, indoctrinate, re-brand their movement on the international stage, sway hearts, and ultimately attract followers or sympathizers. Online image-assisted propaganda has, for these groups, been "a ready channel for depicting their violent acts as legitimate, for reaching sympathetic target audiences, and for intimidating opponents" (Winkler & Dauber, 2014). In her book titled "The Terrorist Images", Winter (2022) does a meticulous analysis of 20,000 photographs deployed by the Islamic State. She identifies the implicit value systems that drive the extremist group's ideological appeal. She remarks that ISIS' visual propaganda aims to denote policy, navigate through defeat, and construct an "impossible reality: a totalizing image-world of Salafi-Jihadist symbols and myths" (p. xi). A thing common to most insurgent and extremist groups' use of visual propaganda is that, while graphically making a case for their violent "activism", they tend to stress their military superiority and the weaknesses of the government(s) or the regular armies they combat on the (offline) battlefield. An analyst at the Directorate of National Intelligence Open Source Center, Martin Gurri, and two of his colleagues corroborate the above observation with close reference

to the al-Qaeda movement's use of visual propaganda at the beginning of the Second Gulf War (in Iraq). The researchers pointedly note that:

*From the earliest days of the war in Iraq, terrorist and insurgent attacks were regularly staged so that they could be captured on video. In fact, al Qaeda's penchant for spectacular operations can be interpreted as an attempt to persuade the world, using starkly visual arguments, of the weakness of western nations and the strength and military superiority of a fearless band of warriors. (Gurri, Denny, & Harms, 2010, p. 103)*

Another characteristic that is common to most extremist and insurgent groups' leverage of image-based propaganda is that, generally, disinformation and misinformation underpin the bulk of the images these groups use online. The footage or photographs they use in their communications are mostly manipulated or doctored. Such manipulation aims to generate post-truths and fake news and ultimately mislead viewers (The [Economist](#), 2007; [Dauber](#), 2009).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Brief Background to the Ambazonia War and Pro-Secession Online Activism in Cameroon

It will be expedient, from the outset, to provide a brief background to the Anglophone crisis as well as a background to pro-secession online activism in Cameroon. The Ambazonia war erupted in 2016, but its root causes are found in Cameroon's contemporary political history as well as in the country's numerous socio-political problems. One of such socio-political problems is the country's mismanagement of the so-called Anglophone problem, which has persisted since the early part of the post-independence period. Actually, Cameroon has a tri-cultural colonial experience. The country was annexed in 1884 by Germany. However, following the defeat of the Germans in the First World War and the signing of the Versailles Treaty, Cameroon was partitioned into two territories (British and East Cameroon) and administered separately by France and Britain as mandated territories, first of the League of Nations and later of the United Nations. Britain administered its share of Cameroon (then called British Cameroons) as an integral part of Nigeria, while France administered its own portion of Cameroon as a colony on its own called French Cameroon or East Cameroon. France took the lion's share of Cameroon. This made French-speaking Cameroon territorially and population-wise dominant compared to British Cameroon.

The partition of Cameroon enabled the introduction of two distinct cultures (Francophone and Anglophone) into Cameroon. French Cameroon got its independence in 1960 and sought reunification with English-speaking Cameroon a year later. British Cameroon got its own independence through a plebiscite in which its people were asked to choose either to join Nigeria or reunite with French Cameroon as a step towards achieving their independence. British Southern Cameroonians voted massively to reunite with their Francophone brothers, believing in the project of a federal Cameroon that is jealous of perfect equality between Francophones and Anglophones. However, upon reunification, the Cameroonian government adopted the 1961 Constitution derived from the 1961 Fomuban Conference. This Constitution introduced a federal system of territorial administration, which clearly did not guarantee the long-awaited equality between Francophones and Anglophones. The International Crisis [Group](#) (2017) considers this non-egalitarian federalism as one of the factors at the heart of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon. The international observer writes that:

*The process leading to the reunification of the two Cameroons is at the heart of the Anglophone problem. [...] Representatives of Southern Cameroons and the president of the Republic of Cameroon, Amadou Ahidjo, met at Foumban in the west of Francophone territory from July 17 until July 21, 1961, to negotiate the terms of reunification. Even today, the failure to keep the promises made at the Foumban conference, which did not produce a written agreement, is among the grievances of Anglophone militants. The Anglophone representatives thought they were participating in a constituent assembly that would draft a constitution guaranteeing egalitarian federalism and a large degree of autonomy to federated states, but Ahidjo imposed a ready-made constitution that gave broad powers to the executive of the federal state to the detriment of the two federated states (West Cameroon and East Cameroon). The Anglophones, who were in a weak position, accepted Ahidjo's constitution and only obtained a blocking minority by way of concession. (p.2-3)*

The non-egalitarian federalism adopted in 1961 even evolved into a more problematic dispensation eleven years later: since 1972, Cameroonian governments have abandoned federalism in favor of a highly centralized or fake decentralized system of administration that marginalized various minority groups in the country. The abolition of the federal system in favor of the centralized system of administration is, from the reading of many historians, political analysts, and international observers, the nod of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon (International Crisis Group, 2017; ACAPS, 2021; Agwanda & Ugur, 2021; Bang & Balgah, 2022). The abolition is believed to have ushered in anti-Anglophone political cultures and dispensations as well as perceptible anti-Anglophone marginalization in the country.

In effect, the Anglophone communities claim to be the most affected by Cameroon's fake decentralization. The perceived marginalization of Anglophones in the country has led to what is popularly called the Anglophone Complex and the Anglophone Problem. In effect, Anglophone communities have developed a strong sentiment that they are seriously oppressed and marginalized in all the country's social institutions because of their minority status. They claim not to enjoy top or very influential positions in the country's civil service as well as in the country's administrative architecture. These communities also claim not to be touched by infrastructural development projects comparable to or equal to those conceived for Francophone zones. In line with this, the leader of one of the secessionist movements active in Anglophone Cameroon, Sisiku Ayuk, highlights the (perceived) political, cultural, and economic marginalization of Anglophones, thus:

*All our institutions have crumbled; they've taken away everything that makes us human. Even the simple institutions on our land [Anglophone Cameroons] have been destroyed. We had two airports; as we speak, you cannot land on our soil; there's a deep seaport in our land abandoned to a seaport in Douala<sup>2</sup>. Today, there are 38 oil blocks in operation in Cameroon, 30 of which happen to be in Southern Cameroons. They built a refinery on our land, and they channeled a depot of the oil onto their land. (Citation in Ekah, 2019, p. 158)*

In addition to the grievances mentioned above, the Anglophones vehemently decry the second-class status of English and Anglophone cultures in the country. They constantly denounce the more than visible Francophone dominance of all sectors of activities in the country. In tandem with this, ACAPS (2021) remarks that "the majority of Cameroon has its roots in Francophone traditions and the Francophone judicial system, while the minority NWSW (Northwest and

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Douala is a city located in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. It is situated in Francophone Cameroon and is the economic capital of Cameroon.



Southwest) regions have roots in Anglophone traditions and the judicial system and have long viewed the Francophone influence as a threat to their way of life” (p. 2).

This widespread sentiment of marginalization and suspicion among Anglophones has motivated the creation of a good number of secessionist movements since the 1990s. A case in point are the clandestine non-violent campaigns initiated by Federick Alobwede Ebong’s Southern Cameroun National Council (SCNC) since 1995. The campaigns have been aimed at pushing for separatism and the independence of Anglophone Cameroon. The failure of the above-mentioned non-violent movements and the Cameroon government’s lukewarm attitude towards addressing the Anglophone problem have fuelled more violent secessionist movements. These factors have led to the emergence of new armed separatist groups bent on actualizing the independence of former southern Cameroon. In September 2017, Anglophone lawyers took to the streets to protest the adulteration of the Common Law system in Anglophone courts. The lawyers, among other things, protested the imposition of Francophone judges in English-speaking courts and the presence of French-speaking judges who had a doubtful knowledge of the English system of law. The lawyers’ protest was violently repressed by Cameroon’s security forces, leading to widespread condemnation inside and outside the country. Almost simultaneously, Anglophone teachers initiated a movement similar to that of their counterparts in the legal profession. The teachers’ industrial action aimed to protest the “francization” of the English system of education in Cameroon, among other issues. The Anglophone teachers’ protest was similarly brutally repressed. This fuelled violent secessionist movements in the country, characterized by the emergence not only of armed insurgent and secessionist groups such as the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), the Ambazonia Military Force (AMF), the Ambazonia Tigers, and the Southern Cameroon Defence Forces (SOCADEF), among others, but also of a myriad of pro-secession activists who have been using social media to spread all manner of disinformation and violent messages. Such activists have been capitalizing on the growing internet penetration in the country and the loose nature of social media to spread sensational messages, many of which qualify as fake news (Nounkeu, 2020).

From the year 2000 to 2021, there has been a remarkable growth in internet penetration in Cameroon, though such penetration remains low compared to the one observed in most western countries. According to the World Internet Stat (2021), Cameroon has, from 2000 to 2020, witnessed an internet growth of 59.29%. NoiPoll (2020), in the same line, affirms that 29% of Cameroonians have access to the Internet and social media. The literature available also indicates that social media use in Cameroon has remarkably increased since the year 2000. According to Statcounter (2022), the most popular social media platforms in Cameroon are as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Use of Social Media in Cameroon

Rank	Name of Social Media	Users in Percentage
1	Facebook	83.29
2	Twitter	5.65
3	Instagram	4.75
4	Pinterest	.3.22
5	YouTube	22.72
6	Linkedin	0.31

Source: Statcounter (2022)

This increase in internet penetration has enabled the emergence and popularity of various forms of digital culture in these countries, including hashtagging, citizen journalism, online activism, and even online extremism, among others. Since 2011, an increasing number of internet-based movements have been observed in the country (Endong 2022). In October 2016, for instance, a train derailment that claimed the lives of 70 people and left over 600 Cameroonians seriously injured engendered virulent online criticism against the government. This online anti-government criticism tested the nerves of Cameroonian officials. It also led many top government officials to brand online activism as a form of terrorism and to propose stringent internet censorship (Stannard, 2016).

The outbreak of the Ambazonia crisis has even made these online movements more perceptible and popular. This is true of the emergence of such online protests as #BringBackOurInternet, #FreeMiniMefo, #FreeMicheleNdoki, and #FreeAllArrested, among others, which marked various phases of the Anglophone crisis. Pro- and anti-secessionist activists and movements have capitalized on the growing penetration of the internet and the progressive explosion of social media in Cameroon to spread various forms of propaganda, half-truths, and even fake news. This will be analyzed in greater detail in the subsequent sections of this paper.

### 3.2. Pro and Anti-Secession Activists' use of Online Visual Propaganda

Pro-secessionist activists have been deploying diverse strategies in cyberspace to spread post-truths, sensational news, and controversial stories that may, on the one hand, discredit the Cameroonian government and, on the other hand, enable them (secessionist activists) to woo the international community in favor of their separatist cause. The literature available highlights the use of multimedia contents ranging from videos to screenshot tweets, presumably aimed among other things at three targets: (i) expose perceived dirty secrets of top members of Biya's regime; (ii) inform the international community about the gross human rights violations committed daily by security forces in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon; and (iii) project the resilience, the strike power, and the valour of secessionist fighters in activity in the troubled zones of Cameroon (Ngange & Mokondo, 2019; Nounkeu, 2020; 2019; Nganji & Cockburn, 2020; Endong, 2021). As earlier mentioned, one of the weapons used by these pro-secessionist activists to achieve the above-mentioned objectives is doctored or manipulated images. Pro-secessionists have actually been collecting images from different online sources, which they carefully distort using sophisticated computer software. Such manipulation of images has enabled them to superimpose their pro-secession messages, spread fake news, and ultimately deceive and mislead viewers. Prime examples of these distorted online images are given in plates 2–4 below.



Plate 2: Manipulated Image of a March Protest in Bamenda

Plate 2 presents the original image on the right and the distorted image generated by separatists on the left. The plate illustrates how pro-secessionist activists manipulated an image that, originally, was meant to counter the separatist cause. The plate also shows how the above-mentioned violent activists used such a distorted image to give the impression that their secessionist agenda has gained popularity in the troubled Anglophone zones of Cameroon. The original image (on the right hand side) documents an event that happened in May 2019 in the North-western Region of Cameroon, particularly in the region's headquarter called Bamenda. During the event, masses came out in their numbers to march in protest of a ghost town movement instituted by separatist and secessionist insurgents in the region as a way of defying the Cameroonian administration in the region. On the banner held by the marchers, one can read the cry "THE PEOPLE OF BAMENDA SAY NO TO GHOST TOWN". Using sophisticated digital tools, the separatist activists maintained the visual composition of the image but carefully doctored the verbal message of the image (see image on the left-hand side). Thus, the above anti-ghost town inscription was changed to "THE POPULATION OF BAMENDA SAYS YES TO GHOST TOWN! FREE SOUTHERN CAMEROONS". This distortion intrinsically reflects Anglophone insurgents' gloomy portrayal of the Cameroonian army and government in the North-West Region. In effect, the insurgents consider Cameroon's army and government institutions operating in Anglophone regions of the country as forces of occupation or colonial entities. Through the manipulated image, the insurgents and separatist activists seek to sell the idea that the majority of Anglophones view Cameroon's army as a colonial force that must be resisted and flushed out of the Anglophone zone of Cameroon.



Place 3: Manipulated Image of Boko Haram Islamist Group

In Plate 3, a similar image manipulation is done to give the impression that the separatist movements and insurgent groups operating in North-West and South-West Cameroon have a well-equipped army that backs their cause and protects pro-secession Anglophones. The plate actually shows how the separatists manipulated an image of Boko Haram fighters to make it look like a glimpse of the sophisticated army that fights for the independence and human rights of Anglophones in the South-West and North-West Regions of Cameroon. The separatists doctored the image by simply superimposing the separatist flag on that of the Boko Haram Islamic sect. The ultimate goal of the manipulated image is to galvanize Anglophone



Cameroonians and make them believe in the insurgents and separatists ability to actualize the independence of Anglophone Cameroon.



**Plate 4: Image of a Policeman Manipulated by Pro-Separatists**

Another instance of visual propaganda used by pro-separatist activists in Cameroon is shown in Plate 4. The image shown in this plate accompanied or spiced up various online contents aimed at reporting police and army brutality in North-West and South-West Cameroon (Ngange & Mokondo, 2019). The image was actually used on various platforms to support rumors that the police officers responsible for the deaths of presumed separatist fighters in North-West Cameroon were being lynched or assassinated by angry mobs or secret agents of the separatist army. Meanwhile, the image was captured on the occasion of a spiritual deliverance. Actually, a police officer visited the temple of a popular African prophet, who prayed and exorcised him. The policeman fell to the floor in the course of the exorcism and was photographed by people present at the scene of the deliverance session. Separatists used this image out of context to give the false impression that violent and deadly reprisal actions were being taken by the masses and members of secessionist movements against security forces involved in the fight against separatism in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.

Similar to pro-secession activists, a number of pro-government entities have been leveraging visual propaganda to tarnish the image of Anglophone separatist fighters. A case in point is Cameroon officials' use of unproven online image-assisted rumors to negatively frame secessionist Anglophone movements. On June 25, 2018, for instance, Cameroon's Minister of Territorial Administration, Paul Atanga Nji, hinged on a controversial Facebook post to label Anglophone separatists as cannibals and terrorists. The Facebook content in question was actually a link showing footage of a man cooking body parts in a pot over a wood fire. The footage had gone viral in Cameroon, and according to rumors, the video was shot in English-speaking Cameroon, and the man in the footage was said to be a cannibal. Also, rumors said the perceived cannibal was a member of one of the separatist insurgent groups fighting for the creation of a breakaway state in Anglophone Cameroon. Without seeking adequate verification, Minister Atanga Nji capitalized on the opportunity that offered him the controversial video

to associate Anglophone separatists with cannibals. He used the controversial situation to support more severe military actions against secessionist fighters in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions. In his language, Anglophone separatists are even worse than Boko Haram terrorists. On "Presidence Actu", a program aired on state television Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), the Minister said "Boko Haram committed atrocities, but they did not cut up humans and cook them in puts" (cited in [McAllister, 2018](#)). The statement was made in the June 25, 2018 edition of Presidency Actu.

It should, however, be noted that the minister's statement was made in the context of an information war opposing pro-government and nationalist movements and separatist fighters and sympathizers. In this war, government officials sought to hinge on the least unfavorable information available to tarnish the image of separatist movements in the country and ultimately win the hearts of both local and international observers for the government's anti-secession agenda in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. Thus, the minister's statement hinged on mere fake news: the footage so talked about was, in reality, not a reflection of reality. The footage, no doubt, went viral, but the man in the video was neither a separatist (fighter) nor a cannibal. The body parts seen in the video were not real. Neither was the video even shot in Anglophone Cameroon. Contrarily, the clip's images were extracted from a Nigerian film and originally uploaded to Instagram on June 17, 2018 by Nigerian make-up artist Hakeem Onilogbo. Mr. Onilogbo had the culture of using Instagram to showcase his artistic works. He never intended to represent real-life situations or human conditions in Anglophone Cameroon.

Besides the controversial cannibal video, government officials have often sought to inflate or exaggerate real incidents of separatist fighters' use of brutality or animosity against civilians. Such exaggerations have aimed to sell the idea that the separatist fighters have no humanistic mantra and no legitimate cause to defend. In addition to this, they are rather a barbaric force seeking to perpetrate chaos and extreme human suffering in Anglophone zones. This attitude to video purporting the excesses of the separatists was observed in August 11, 2020 when a video showing two presumed separatist fighters manhandling and killing a defenceless 35-years old woman created a buzz in Cameroon's cyberspace. The video in question, shows a woman who had been identified by the government as Confort Tumassang, being beaten and dragged on the ground with her hands tied behind her back. Her two detractors manhandle her while she, begs in vain for mercy. The two men finally behead her and abandon her body in a Kumba street.

A second video, filmed before the killing, provides clues into the motivations of the assassins. This second video shows the same woman being interrogated and threatened by her murderers, who accuse Tumassang of cooperating with security forces against the separatists. Government officials capitalized on these two gloomy videos to fuel their propaganda against the separatists. On August 13, 2020, Cameroon's Minister of Communication, Issa Chirouma Bakari, issued a statement condemning the killing of Tumassang and lambasting the separatists. Meanwhile, an investigation carried out by Human Rights Watch revealed that separatists' responsibility in the murder is a matter for debate and further investigation, although many factors related to the gruesome act point to the secessionist groups' agency. When contacted to react to the two videos, the three main separatist groups claimed innocence and rather suggested that the killing and the videos were a well-orchestrated government scheme aimed at discrediting their cause of self-determination. Human Rights Watch reporter [Mudge \(2020\)](#) documents this accusation and counter-accusation episode around the two videos thus: "When Human Rights Watch contacted the three main Anglophone separatist groups [...] for their reaction to the



video, they condemned the killing but denied responsibility. Some blamed each other, while others accused government soldiers of disguising themselves as separatist fighters to commit atrocities—an accusation which the Minister of Communication dismissed” (Mudge, 2020, p. 5).

### 3.3. International Observers’ Use or Treatment of Images to Mediate in the Anglophone Crisis

Pro-government movements’ and separatist fighters’ use of online visual propaganda has, in most cases, attracted the attention of the international community. Global human rights observers such as international non-governmental organizations, international media, telecom operators, and social media sites, among others, have intervened in various cases of visual propaganda and fake news related to the Ambazonia war to clarify issues. Such interventions have been aimed either at simply debunking fake news or contributing to the socio-political debate about the crisis. Many of these international organizations have also relied on images or image-treatment technologies to enrich or substantiate their positions. For instance, when the footage of the presumed cannibalistic separatist went viral, many local and international websites quickly debunked the notion, providing both visual and anecdotal evidence to explain the context in which the footage was generated and the basis on which these online images were fake and misleading news and a threat to peace in Cameroon. Regional news agencies, such as Reuters, drew the attention of Facebook to the misleading nature of the footage, calling on the social website to withdraw the contents as they violated Facebook’s principles. Thus, international observers have often deployed sophisticated fact-checking technologies to verify the contents of the video-aided messages spread in Cameroonian cyberspace. These technologies have helped determine the veracity of online images deployed by separatists or pro-government movements to shape public opinion in and outside Cameroon (Ndongmo 2019).

In tandem with the above, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published a video report on June 25, 2018, where it sought to prove the veracity of a series of online gory footage that suggested the occurrence of serious incidents of military brutality and gross violations of human rights in Cameroon’s Anglophone zones. Titled “Burning Cameroon: Images You’re Not Meant to See”, the video report assessed over 131 villages through satellite imagery and provided the geo-location of various incidents of military aggression in Anglophone zones to highlight evidence of Cameroon’s army’s destruction of buildings by burning in the five different subdivisions of South-West Cameroon. These five subdivisions include Mbonge, Kumba, Ekondo Titi, Konye, and Nguti. The BBC used satellite imagery to confirm the veracity of a series of widely circulated videos and online contents that purported that the Cameroonian army was randomly and arbitrarily burning down villages in the Anglophone Region to sow untold terror in districts considered or suspected to be pro-separatist and non-cooperative with the army.

Although many sources have brandished this BBC video report as relevant and irrefutable evidence of military brutality in zones considered pro-separatist, it should be noted that “Burning Cameroon” only provides evidence of building destruction using satellite imagery. It only answers the what, where, how, and when questions related to the burning of villages. It does not credibly identify the perpetrators of this destruction. The video intermittently presents footage of men in fatigues burning villages unrepentantly. The video merely suggests or assumes that the men in fatigues are members of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), an elite army unit dreaded in the country for its very muscular *modus operandi*. Such an

assumption is arguable, as any entity could disguise itself as a member of the security forces to mislead viewers and generate confusion. No doubt, Cameroon officials have dismissed much of the claims made in this BBC video report. These officials have, on various occasions, deployed the “it could be anyone” line of argument to protect the government from accusations of building destruction and human rights violations in the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon.

Former Cameroonian Minister of Communication Issa Chirouma Bakari once questioned the veracity and credibility of online videos and video reports such as the BBC’s “Burning Cameroon”. On several occasions, he has argued that “they (the separatists) are able to acquire military uniforms of the Rapid Intervention Battalion or any other brigade of the defense forces in order to perpetrate their crime and blame our defense and security forces for it” (Kome, 2019). At first sight, Mr. Chirouma’s statement could be regarded as a predictable subterfuge to bail the Cameroonian government out of trouble. According to the popular fantasy in Cameroon, such subterfuge is very much expected of the government. However, his logic is tenable if one considers the fact that some separatist fighters often wear military uniforms when they launch their operations.

If international observers such as Reuters and the BBC cited above have most often intervened to debunk or confirm the truth claim of videos that are in the disfavor of the Cameroonian government, other observers, notably Human Rights Watch, have on a few occasions confirmed or emphasized the veracity of videos that plead in the disfavor of the separatist movements. In a report titled “Horrific Video Shows Cameroon Killing”, Human Rights Watch analyzes the two (earlier mentioned) videos showing the killing of 53-year-old Tumasang. The right organization also makes allusion to many other videos and visual evidence that it has analyzed and found apt to prove human rights violations perpetrated by separatist fighters in North-West and South-West Cameroon. In tandem with this, Human Rights Watch reporter Mudge (2020) observes, for instance, that the video showing the killing of Tumassang “corroborates previous accounts of killings by armed separatists documented by Human Rights Watch since late 2016” (p. 4). It goes without saying that, although such well-researched investigations primordially serve valid purposes, they intrinsically aid the parties involved in the information war. In effect, although they credibly inform the masses about the state of human rights protection and violations in the war-ridden zones, Human Rights Watch reports sometimes provide elements that the Cameroonian government and the separatist fighters use in their information war to discredit or frame one another.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the Anglophone crisis in 2016, images—in the form of video, photographs, and audio-visual media reportage—have represented strategic weapons for the parties involved in the war and their allies. Indeed, the crisis has been characterized by an information war opposing pro-government and nationalist movements and secessionist and separatist fighters. This information war has involved the use of more or less manipulated visuals aimed ultimately at re-enforcing pro- or anti-separatist propaganda. In this article, over three types of visual propaganda have been examined. The first type includes propaganda aided by purely doctored images and fake news. This has been observed in situations where separatist activists and their allies used sophisticated software to fake photos or videos in view of tarnishing the image of their adversaries or government and in view of representing their violent activism as a cause that is not only legitimate and ideal but also natural. Separatist fighters and activists in particular have been using this type of cooked images and fake news to give the impression that most

Anglophones in Cameroon are in support of their separatist cause and that the various socio-political institutions (notably the “liberation army”) clandestinely established by the separatists in Anglophone regions are well equipped, dedicated, resilient, effective, and promising.

The second type of visual propaganda examined in this paper is aided by videos or other forms of images that, although real or a representation of reality, are intentionally or inadvertently used out of context to sell a pro- or anti-separatist concept. Both pro-government and pro-separatist movements have been using this type of visual propaganda. The third type of visual propaganda involves the deployment of images that, although undoctored, are interpreted exaggeratingly with the intent to frame opposing parties. Both pro- and anti-separatist movements have also been using these typologies of visual propaganda.

It has also been argued in this paper that the information war between pro- and anti-separatists has attracted the attention of international observers, including international non-governmental organizations, international media houses, and telecom operators, among others. These international observers have been using images to mediate in the conflict or to contribute to the social and political discourse around the crisis. These international observers have often used images to debunk or confirm the truth values of video contents used for propagandist or extremist purposes in Cameroon. The recrudescence of visual propaganda by pro- and anti-separatist movements in Cameroonian cyberspace warrants constant fact-checking initiatives to debunk fake news. The visual propaganda also calls for efficacious and intelligent internet censorship.

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