



TRENDS IN ELECTORAL FRAUD: THE USAGE OF FAKE ELECTION MONITORS IN CAMEROON AND BEYOND”

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Abstract: Authoritarian regimes across Africa and beyond are increasingly cracking down on civil society groups, making their operations more and more difficult. Within this clampdown, a menacing trend is emerging, one that sees fake civil society groups, both of supposed international and domestic nature, being used to legitimize fraudulent elections. These fake elections observers represent a tactic increasingly deployed by authoritarian leaders in an effort to confuse the narrative around clearly fraudulent polls. Fake election observation groups “try to look like democratic observers, but serve authoritarian purposes by pretending that clearly flawed elections deserve clean bills of health.” (Cooley, 2016, p.124; also see Walker and Cooley, 2013) Such dubious electoral endorsements made by fake monitors are becoming normal for autocrats worldwide in a desire to add a veneer of legitimacy to deeply flawed elections. More and more, media-savvy dictators and key elites are consolidating their power by controlling and manipulating the flow of information about elections. The perceptions of elections and their results seem to matter more than the actual substance of the polls themselves. Fake observers have been used to issue positive reports of a wide variety of deeply problematic elections throughout Africa, including in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, and Djibouti. Yet, in one of the most brazen examples of this trend, after the recent 7 October 2018 presidential elections in Cameroon, individuals claiming affiliation with Transparency International (TI) appeared on state-controlled media, Cameroon Radio Television, claiming that the polls were free and fair. Oddly enough, TI did not send an international election observer mission to Cameroon to monitor that particular presidential election. (TI Press Release, 9 October 2018). The Biya regime tried to use the fake observer tactic to give a stamp of approval to the highly dubious election. (Sama, 2018) At a critical time for the stability of Cameroon, especially considering the insurrection in the Anglophone regions, this type

of manipulative behavior clearly undermines the integrity of the political system generally. Accordingly, the proposed research project seeks to understand how exactly these fake election observers function in various contexts across the African continent and how their activities serve to erode domestic perceptions of electoral integrity and corrode the international norm of external election observation. The recent example of the events around Cameroon's 7 October 2018 presidential election will be used as a single case study to illustrate this growing trend.

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes across Africa and beyond the continent are increasingly cracking down on civil society groups, making their operations more and more difficult (Smidt, 2018). Despots are radically reducing the space open to the activities of civil society and pro-democracy movements as they develop new strategies control it (European Parliament, 2017). Within this larger clampdown across the planet, a menacing new development is emerging, one that is undermining free and fair, democratic elections in general. As Lee Morgenbesser points out in his 2018 piece in *Foreign Affairs*, “[d]ubious electoral endorsements are becoming normal for dictators worldwide.” (Morgenbesser, 2018). That is to say, at the center of this trend are “fake” civil society groups, both of supposed international and domestic nature, which are being used by authoritarian governments to legitimize fraudulent elections.

These fake election observer organizations represent a tactic that has been increasingly deployed by authoritarian leaders in an effort to confuse the narrative around clearly fraudulent polls, whitewashing the elections for the local population and the world audience at large (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018). These fake civil society organizations which present themselves as election observation groups, “try to look like democratic observers, but serve authoritarian purposes by pretending that clearly flawed elections deserve clean bills of health.” (Cooley, 2016:124). The electoral endorsements made by fake election monitoring groups are becoming normal practice for autocrats worldwide in a desire to add a veneer of legitimacy to deeply flawed elections.

More and more, such media-savvy dictatorial regimes are restricting political/civic space and consolidating their power by controlling and manipulating the flow of information about elections (Guriev and Treisman, 2015). The perceptions of elections and their results in many cases seem to matter more than the actual substance of the polls themselves (Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002). The trend of authoritarian governments deploying bogus election monitors emerged from the former Soviet political space, mainly Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the backlash after the Color Revolutions in the 2000s (Beacháin and Polese, 2010). The origins of this illicit electioneering tool will be discussed in the first part of this study. However, more recently, fake election observer groups have been used to issue positive reports of a wide variety of deeply problematic elections throughout Africa, including in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, and Djibouti. Yet, in one of

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the most brazen examples of this trend would come after the 7 October 2018 presidential elections in Cameroon. Some government officials invented a group and tried to use the fake observer tactic to give a stamp of approval to the highly dubious election. At a critical time for the stability of Cameroon, especially considering the insurrection in the Anglophone regions and the ongoing threat from the Islamist group Boko Haram in the North of the country, this type of manipulative behavior clearly undermines the integrity of the political system generally. Accordingly, the following study seeks to understand how exactly these fake election observers function in various contexts across the African continent and how their activities serve to erode domestic perceptions of electoral integrity and corrode the international norm of external election observation. The example of the events around Cameroon's 7 October 2018 presidential elections will be used as a case to illustrate this growing trend. In order to address this issue, this study will be broken down into the following four sections:

- What purpose do election monitors serve?
- What are fake election monitor groups?
- Origins of the fake election monitor groups and their spread
- The Case of Cameroon.

What purpose do election monitors serve?

Apparently “free and fair” democratic elections can provide a certain sense of acceptability to authoritarian regimes. Far below that threshold, for that matter, simply the holding of democratic elections can provide deeply desired validation to any regime. It appears that autocrats have signalled their compliance to the norm of holding elections in exchange for certain benefits, sometimes foreign aid, but primarily for international and domestic legitimacy (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2008; Emmanuel, 2010 and 2013). Bush and Prather (2017:922) define elections as credible when “people trust its results and believe that it produces an outcome that reflects the will of the people.” That is to say, credible elections result from a relatively fair process. Yet, this public consent or legitimacy quickly fades away when the government in question becomes viewed as having cheated, undermining the idea of a credible or fair election. This is why we understand the role of election observers as being so important.

Accordingly, the international community spends quite a bit of time and effort on helping promote and verifying elections (Grömping, 2017:408; Lührmann, McMann and van Ham, 2016). A central element of promoting democracy by the international donor community is placed on elections, election monitoring, and assisting civil society groups to keep elections free and fair. In itself, the presence of election observation groups provides a credible signal of a government's commitment to democratic elections. Observers are simply that objective outsiders (although domestic observers are a frequent part of the election landscape as well) that do not interfere in the electoral process, only monitoring the process and results. In so, most

election observers worldwide pledge to follow the United Nations Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, agreed in 2005.

According to Hyde (2011:35), such election observation groups “primarily serve an informational role ... to evaluate the quality of elections.” Clearly, an election observer’s primary job is to detect fraud and to voice their assessment of the process and results. Their activities influence the local perceptions of election credibility and therefore the way in which the domestic and international audiences perceive the results (Bush and Prather, 2018:660). This is because elections are more likely to be seen as being credible and fair when the citizens of that country learn that election observers are monitoring the election. Election observers are important because they shape beliefs about election credibility by providing information about the fairness of the election process as well as the outcome. Furthermore, Bush and Prather (2018) argue that election observers enhance the local credibility of elections when the public perceives observers as capable and unbiased. Well-known and respected observation groups can have a big impact on the perception of a given election. Nonetheless, virtually unknown or even fraudulent groups can leave a significant impression on the public’s view of an election. As Alexander Cooley (2016:124) argues:

“[t]raditionally, election monitoring has been the mission of a few skilled NGOs and international organizations such as the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), acting through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). These groups bring to their work extensive experience, technical expertise, and an understanding of the best practices to be followed in observing and evaluating elections, including measures such as long-term monitoring.”

Yet, authoritarian regimes still hold elections that are frequently deemed fraudulent by these traditional election observers, like the ODIHR. In doing so, “[a]utocratic regimes have sought to gain ... legitimacy via flawed elections” (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017:238). These dictators consolidate power by holding elections in which they closely control and manipulate the flow of information. Over the past several decades, authoritarians have increasingly experimented with some old, along with a number of new, tools to erode the democratic norms and maintain power by manipulating. They include some of the following tactics.

Manipulating Elections: Some Common Tactics

- Banning opposition parties and their leaders from contesting the elections
- Conveniently changing the dates of elections
- Banning international election observers
- Hindering mobile phone and internet access across the country
- Election-related intimidation and violence
- Fraud during the elections
- Fraud during the vote-counting process

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- Fraud during the transmission of voting data from the polling stations to the central counting administrative offices.
- Using fake or fake election observation groups to legitimize rigged elections

This study asks about the role of “fake” election observers, examining how they function generally, their origins, as well as in the specific case study of Cameroon. As will be discussed below, these “fake” elections observers setup by bogus or even non-existent groups are part of a larger trend used by authoritarian leaders to condone fraud or at least confuse the narrative around the polls themselves. Fake election monitors represent part of a larger effort by authoritarian leaders to consolidate their grip on power, in this case by rigging elections. What are these fake election observation groups and how do they function in a case such as Cameroon?

What are “fake” election observation groups and what impact do they have?

Since the end of the Cold War, most of the countries on the planet have moved to accept some sort of elections and the norm of using external election observers to verify the fairness of an election and the election process. However, a growing number of authoritarian regimes are increasingly turning to fake election monitors to keep their hold on power. Indeed, their dubious electoral endorsements are becoming normal for a wide range of autocrats worldwide. How exactly do these groups erode domestic perceptions of electoral integrity and corrode the international norms of external election observation? Fake election observers have proven to be an extremely successful technique, deployed across a large swath of countries in a wide variety of geographic locations. Recently, fake election observer groups have been used to produce positive reports of deeply flawed elections across the planet. As Cooley (2016:124) points out, these election observers.

undermine international standards with their bogus assessments, or to reverse general international impressions of an election’s poor quality ... [z]ombie monitors try to look like democratic observers, but serve authoritarian purposes by pretending that clearly flawed elections deserve clean bills of health.

Furthermore, these fake election observer organizations are part of an effort led by authoritarian regimes worldwide to redefine the very *raison d’être* of international election observation missions as a whole (Cooley, 2015). An increasingly large number of authoritarian regimes weaken the practice of holding democratic elections with the usage of fake or fake election monitors. These groups are made up of individuals frequently from variety of sources, including extremist political groups from Europe or from other authoritarian countries, but also from domestically based groups created and financed by the authoritarian regimes. These types of fake groups are deployed by a given regime to help whitewash a fixed election and to counter the internationally recognized election monitors by confusing the election narrative of

pro-democracy civil society groups. The fake election observer groups are used by the authoritarian regime holding the election not only to win the contest, but also to consolidate power more generally by misleading the population and the international community about the fairness of the election. Authoritarian “[r]egimes use fakes to confuse and distract” (Cooley, 2016:124).

So, what are fake election monitoring groups? Simply put, the term “fake” should be reserved for those groups that are organized with the sole purpose of discrediting election processes and results. But, Max Grömping (2017:418) defines these organizations as international or transnational groups that are invited by an authoritarian regime to certify or give their approval to a fraudulent election, or to at least change the narrative in order to cast doubt on the negative reports of Western-sponsored observers and pro-democracy NGOs. Dictators and dominant authoritarian parties deploy fake election monitors as part of a sham or mock compliance strategy to the international norm of holding elections and the use of external election observation to validate the process and the results. The use of fake election “observation groups has become a globally applied strategy” in an effort to confuse the narrative around clearly fraudulent polls (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017: 238).

Key Elements of Fake Election Monitor Groups:

Debre and Morgenbesser (2017:230) have identified five key main characters of fake election monitor groups as follows:

1. Frequently are comprised of representatives sent from autocratic countries.
2. May also be new domestic groups, created by the ruling party of the autocratic country themselves.
3. These groups often take names that are close to real international election monitoring organizations, making them sound genuine to domestic and international audiences.
4. The fake election monitoring groups are frequently not signatories to the United Nations 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers
5. Fake groups provide validation to elections that are judged to have low integrity by other observer groups. This weakens the strength of more critical assessments of given election by other monitoring groups.

High quality international election observers, such as those from the OSCE, have to compete with these low quality, fake, or fake election monitor groups frequently sent from other authoritarian states from across the globe, and that work with the given incumbent dictatorial regime to legitimize flawed elections (Bush and Prather, 2018: 661). These low quality fake election monitoring groups serve to undermine the efforts of the higher quality observers. The fakes remain mostly invisible until the election results have been made public. Given this reality, the fake election observers are almost impossible to detect before an election. That is to say, the fake election monitors most frequently do not take part in the election process,

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only to emerge with glowing post-election reports, praising the regime and deeming the polls as having been free and fair. They generally do not become apparent until they produce some sort of misleading statement after the announcement of an election outcome (Morgenbesser, 2018). These post-election reports released by the fake monitors frequently give enthusiastic accounts of the regime's victory, underlining the integrity and transparency of the poll. But, it is not until this point, with the publication of such a post-election report, that the fake become observable. These post-election reports put forward by the fake monitors simply push aside internationally accepted norms about what constitutes free and fair democratic elections. They create a false narrative and confusion about the validity of a given election outcome among domestic audiences and the international community. In many of these cases, the news headlines the day after these elections frequently indicate that the observer groups were split on the overall quality of the election, all but handing the victory to the authoritarian incumbent. It is because of this that there has been such a proliferation of these fake election monitoring groups in recent years, bolstering the reign of authoritarian regimes.

The Rise of fake election observation groups on a global scale.

Originally writing in *Foreign Policy* in the fall of 2013, Christopher Walker and Alexander Cooley discussed the emergence of a tactic that was increasingly being used by wily authoritarian regimes, what they called “zombie election monitors”. Since identifying the tactic, it has grown to take on global proportions. From their initial report, such fake monitor groups have been reported in places such as Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Cameroon, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe – just to name a few of the most prominent examples. Since Walker and Cooley's initial publication on the subject in 2013, researchers and journalists have undertaken a larger effort to grasp exactly how these fake groups undermine local perceptions about electoral integrity, as well as to damage the international norms that underpin external election observation efforts. In the next several pages, I would like to look at the origins of this phenomenon and how the tactic has spread around the world from authoritarian regime to authoritarian regime.

To begin with, fake election observer groups are thought to have first emerged within the post-Soviet sphere, primarily in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russian-controlled Crimea, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In an early example, Azerbaijan's 2013 presidential election represents one of the first reported use of fake election monitors by an authoritarian regime. Here, incumbent president Ilham Aliyev tried to whitewash a rigged election with the use of phony observers (Cooley, 2016: 124). Several of the election observer groups monitoring Aliyev's re-election appeared determined to help him attempt to secure a third mandate after he forced a constitutional change to abolish term limits. Aliyev won the poll with an amazing 85% of the electorate supporting him. Most interestingly, out of the numerous election monitoring groups only one, the ODIHR, was critical of the

outcome. What is also notable is that many of these observers in Azerbaijan were unheard of, while others clearly represented a new and sophisticated form of cooperation among authoritarian regimes.

These new types of relationships between authoritarian regimes is clearly represented by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Eurasian regional intergovernmental organization founded in 2001 mainly between China and Russia, but also with the four Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (recently adding India and Pakistan as member states in 2017). The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), another regional intergovernmental organization, made up of a number of successor states to the Soviet Union, behaves in a similar manner. The SCO has to date taken part and given its stamp of approval to a wide variety of controversial elections for number of authoritarian regimes. The behavior of these international organizations and the biased election observer groups that they deploy demonstrates that authoritarian regimes are increasingly cooperating and providing protection for fellow despots. The election monitoring groups sent by groups like the SCO or the CIS, who show support for fellow authoritarians by white washing fraudulent elections, provide a clear counter narrative that attempts to drown out the negative pronouncements put forward by more reputable election monitoring organizations, such as those from the OSCE. Furthermore, both the SCO and the CIS are not signatories to the United Nations Declaration of Principles for International Observation, like most other legitimate election monitoring organizations. Given this reality, it is apparent that authoritarian regimes are sending friendly election monitors designed to simply rubberstamp unfree and unfair elections in other dictatorships around the globe.

Nonetheless, while the SCO and CIS send election monitors that give their approval to clearly fraudulent elections for authoritarian incumbents, I agree with Darin Christensen and Jeremy Weinstein (2013) in questioning whether it is constructive to refer to those two regional intergovernmental organizations' monitors as fakes. These two authors argue that there are other types of organizations that are less established and only come into being for the purpose of discrediting specific elections. They also refer to as fraudulent election monitoring groups. You may find a clear example from the 2018 Cambodian elections discussed below.

Before moving on to Cameroon's October 2018 Presidential elections, Cambodia's national election in July 2018 is also highly informative. This case provides an excellent example of how fake election observation groups are deployed (Morgenbesser, 2018). After Cambodia's highly controversial election in 2013, the United States, the European Union, Japan, and Australia, among others, decided not to take part in the 2018 poll that was widely viewed as a sham election designed to give President Hun Sen at least another decade in power. With these important international actors refusing to send election monitors to observe Cambodia's elections, Phenom Penh decided to invite less reputable groups and individuals not necessarily known for their expertise in the observation of democratic elections (Reuters, 2018).

Instead, election monitoring groups were sent by organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Centrist Asia Pacific Democrats

International (CAPDI), and the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP). These groups are well known as sending fake election observation groups, only designed to prop up an incumbent authoritarian regime and rubber-stamp dubious elections (Marazzi Sassoon, 2018). The delegations from all three groups found the 2018 Cambodian elections to be “a triumph of popular will” as well as being “free, fair and transparent” (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017). The CAPDI and ICAPP also acted as observers and praised Cambodia’s controversial 2013 elections, which caused large protests in the country, leading other observer groups to express their concerns over flagrant irregularities in President Hun Sen’s re-election at that time (Hodal, 2013). Additionally, in 2018, observers from the SCO, CAPDI, and ICAPP were accompanied by a group of politicians from the populist European parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip), the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy Party, the Austrian Freedom Party and a variety of individuals from far right-wing parties in Italy (Morgenbesser, 2018). The Cambodian press welcomed them as “European Union observers”, even though they did not represent the EU at all (Sassoon, 2018).

By their profile and behavior, these groups clearly fit the definition of fake election monitors. That is to say, they exist simply to certify a clearly fraudulent election process and their results while praising the authoritarian incumbent. Lee Morgenbesser, a well-known specialist on the subject of fake election monitor groups, pointed out that “[t]he Cambodian government is attempting to use these “shadow” observation groups as a substitute for the withdrawal of professional observation groups” (ibid).

The presence of these highly biased election “observers for hire” extends far beyond Cambodia, however. These same organizations defend authoritarians across the globe, endorsing the election results and praising the leaders of such countries as Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. These groups’ endorsements come in the face of widespread denunciation of these dictatorial regimes and their behavior by most of the international community. Rubber stamping obviously fraudulent elections in such authoritarian regimes as being free and fair is clearly highly detrimental to the integrity of the polls (Schedler, 2002; Tripp, 2004; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). The use of these fake monitors by authoritarian regimes, which are desperate for domestic and international legitimacy, undermines the trust of the population in the electoral process and democracy as a whole. Furthermore, bringing in international organizations and individuals with dubious motives significantly damages the neutrality that lies at the heart of the election observation process. (Puddington, 2004).

President Hun Sen’s 2018 re-election in Cambodia presents us with a well-documented case of the successful deployment of fake election monitors by an incumbent authoritarian regime. However, as has been stated earlier, Cambodia is not the only country using such fake groups and overall the attractiveness of using bogus monitors is spreading to reaching worldwide proportions (Reuters, 2018). As will be demonstrated in the next section, the case of Cameroon represents a new trend in the overall fake election

observer group phenomenon. President Paul Biya 's regime relied less on regional intergovernmental biased election observer groups, but instead used smaller fake observer organizations to give legitimacy to the rigged October 2018 election. As will be demonstrated, the October 2018 Presidential election in Cameroon represents one of the most egregious examples to date of an authoritarian incumbent using fake election monitoring groups to give legitimacy to a clearly rigged poll in Africa.

Fake Observer Groups - The Case study of 2018 Elections in Cameroon

All but three Sub-Saharan African countries (Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan) have recently held elections. Since the wave of democratization swept across the African continent just over 30 years ago, spreading an opening for multiparty competition and a space for pluralist civil society, Africa, perhaps like the world around it, is currently experiencing at best a democratic recession (Cheeseman and Smith, 2019). Along these lines, *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index* (2019) currently does not classify a single African country as being a "full democracy". Instead, it places countries on the continent into either the category of "authoritarian" or "flawed democracy." Although a bit more optimistic, Freedom House in 2019 identifies only a handful of African countries as being "Free" or democratic (Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia, Sao Tome et Principe, Senegal, and South Africa) (Freedom House, 2019). Nonetheless, almost all of the regimes in the region use elections (fraudulent or not) to gain some sense of legitimacy vis-à-vis its population and the international community. Interestingly enough, authoritarian regimes are increasingly focusing on the perceptions of elections rather than on their substance. Clearly, media-savvy autocrats are increasingly consolidating their power by controlling and manipulating the flow of information. An emerging key tactic in this trend is, as has been argued throughout this paper – fake election monitors. Such groups were reported in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and most perhaps most blatantly in Cameroon's 2018 presidential election (Finnan, 2018).

It is by far no accident that Paul Biya is currently the longest-ruling, non-royal leader in the world and the oldest ruler in Africa, having served as president of Cameroon since 6 November 1982. Currently, Paul Biya has the constitutional possibility of leading Cameroon until 2025. It seems that the only thing that can stop him is his age. He is currently 89 years old (born on 13 February 1933). However, his seven presidential terms have not been without controversy and contestation. The most significant demands for him to leave power came in the early 1990s, when strong domestic and international pressure combined in an attempt to bring change through the ballot box (Bratton and van de Walle, 1992). However, the Biya regime held strong, using a widespread campaign of electoral fraud and human rights abuses in the 1992 legislative and presidential elections to remain in place. In addition, his incumbency was accomplished, regardless of the seemingly overwhelmingly strong wind of change blowing against his regime, by turning to an historic close ally,

France (Emmanuel, 2010). That is to say, while massive demonstrations crippled the country in the beginning of the 1990s, and with the international community moving to put democratic conditions on the country's foreign aid and loans, France pumped in economic aid and security assistance to the Biya regime, propping it up and saving it from collapse (Emmanuel, 2013).

Domestic and international pressure on the Biya regime would wax and wane in Cameroon in the decades after the 1990s. However, Cameroon has also been buffeted with growing unrest and uncertainty in recent years. Mounting pressure and instability seemed to reach an apex in the run-up to the October 2018 elections. Boko Haram was reaping chaos in the North of the country, along with a growing separatist insurrection in the Anglophone South Western and North Western regions, not to mention the on-going crackdown on opposition civil society groups throughout the country. Throughout these unfolding crises over the past few years, the Biya regime and its security forces have committed wide-spread human rights abuses, terrorizing the population. (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Cameroon, which has been, until recently known for its relative stability, has faced rising levels of violence and spreading chaos. The events surrounding the 2018 presidential elections only served to make things worse.

The ruling party quickly claimed a landslide victory. But, as the editors of *Africa Confidential* rightfully argued, "The national elections on 7 October could be the worst yet in Cameroon and will further weaken President Paul Biya's claim to legitimacy" (Africa Confidential, 2018). The country is not safer or more stable despite an apparently decisive election victory by the perennial president. Officially, he won 71.3% of the 7 October 2018 presidential vote (Africa Confidential, 2018). Few were surprised. Most of most well-known international observation groups, except for the African Union and l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, decided not to send representatives to monitor the polls (Africa Confidential, 2018).

After the election results for the presidential poll were released, a number of critics pointed out that the results were not possible. For example, voters from key opposition areas or regions that had experienced significant unrest in the years leading up to the elections, due to the Anglophone insurrection or the Islamist group Boko Haram, supposedly overwhelmingly voted for Paul Biya (Muvunyi). Many suspect that either the incumbent president's vote was either artificially increased, or that opposition voters were prevented from getting to the polls, or many abstained from voting. Probably, more likely is that all three of these realities combined together to help secure Paul Biya's victory.

Regardless, the overall quality of the election is hard to determine. This is a result of the almost insignificant role played by credible, well-known international election observers. Yet, the fraud seemed so overwhelming that there were immediate calls by opposition groups for Cameroon's 2018 presidential election to be annulled. Being accused of vote rigging and human rights violations is nothing new for Paul Biya's regime, but the next step was something novel. This was quickly turning out to be perhaps Cameroon's most controversial and bizarre election in its history. Oddly enough, to remain in power, in the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon,

incumbent Paul Biya's team went to new lows, even for such a highly autocratic regime.

It started out "normally" with Cameroonians turning out to vote and elect their next president on Sunday, 7 October 2018. But, the bizarre part came when on 9 October 2018, when Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) held an interview with a group of international election monitors allegedly from Transparency International, the well-known and highly respected international anti-corruption organization. They quickly presented their conclusion that the elections had simply been completely "free and fair" (Finnan 2018). Cameroonian state-run television showed footage from a press conference with six international election observers identified as belonging to Transparency International (Mumbere 2018). They went on to describe the October 7 polls as "extremely good" (RFI, 2018). Overall, they gave the presidential polls in Cameroon a clean bill of health (RFI, 2018). Furthermore, "We felt the tense atmosphere, but outside of that, the most important thing was to see that polling stations were open, that all the candidates were represented," said Salomon Benros, one of the supposed TI observers, referring to voting in the Anglophone regions of the country (RFI, 2018). According to Radio France International's coverage of the event, Nurit Greenger, the main spokesperson at the press conference, indicated that "[i]t was 'not intimidating' in the north west and south west regions ... 'I think just to protect the area so everything goes smoothly,' referring to armed separatists and heavy presence of security forces in the Anglophone regions where less than half the polling stations opened" (RFI, 2018). Amazingly, however, these were fake election observers. It appears that their operation was set up with the specific intention of providing the election, not to mention the incumbent regime, with a legitimacy boost and to create a false narrative around the event (Sam,a 2018).

Oddly enough, according to Patricia Moreira, Transparency International's Managing Director at the time, her organization did not send a single international election observer to monitor Cameroon's presidential elections (TI, 2018). These fake election monitors were also denounced in the *Journal du Cameroun* during an interview with Charles Nguini, the then president of Cameroon's local branch of Transparency International (Journal du Cameroun, 2018). Paul Biya's re-election team used fake election monitors that pretended to be members from well-know, established international civil society organizations. His regime tried to use the fake observer tactic to give a stamp of approval to a highly questionable election. However, the plan actually only served to undermine regime legitimacy and resulted in ridicule for the ruling party (Africa Confidential, 2018).

Nonetheless, after the elections, Cameroon's election management body, ELECAM, received twenty-five petitions from candidates and voters calling for the elections to be annulled (Kindzeka, 2018). However, these petitions were declined by the courts, which are highly politicized and controlled by people close to the Paul Biya ruling apparatus (Reuters, 2018). There is no doubt that fraud and human rights abuses surrounding the election were widespread (Africa Confidential, 2018). But, it didn't make a difference. The result was a victory for Paul Biya, again. It appears that the investment in fraud and fake election observers pays off, much more than one would expect.

Conclusion

It is clearly a critical time for the future stability of Cameroon. Yet, Cameroonians have little choice but to acquiesce to Paul Biya's unquestioned dominance. Corruption, fraud, human rights abuses, and the use of fake election observers appear to be successful tactics that incumbent authoritarian regimes can deploy to maintain their grip on power. When some election observers praise an election and others criticize it, the resulting confusion creates a distorted narrative that makes it harder for journalists to tell a clear story (Sama, 2018). It seems that the popular perception of elections and their results seem to matter more than the actual substance of the polls themselves. Changing this reality, dominated by fraud and trickery, is what needs to be done. More credible election monitoring organizations, democratic states, and regional organizations need to free up additional resources to analyze, identify, and discredit these fakes (Mumbere, 2018). A coordinated response between these pro-democratic groups of actors needs to take shape. If not, we risk a deepening of the current global democratic recession and a world in which false narratives that uphold fraudulent elections continue to try to deceive electorates for years to come.

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