



Electoral distrust, state repression, and the ritualization of democracy in Cameroon's 2025 presidential election

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how systemic distrust, institutional failure, and state repression converged to undermine electoral legitimacy in Cameroon's 2025 presidential elections.

Drawing on original survey data (n=200), electoral statistics, and anthropological theory, the study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey analysis

with qualitative interviews (n=35) to investigate voter disengagement and perceptions of electoral fairness.

Survey findings reveal that 92% of respondents cite lack of trust in the electoral system as their primary reason for disengagement, while 70% express disillusionment with the Constitutional Council's candidate vetting process. Voter turnout declined to 54% (from 58% in 2018), signaling a deepening crisis of participation. Over 60 protest-related

deaths followed the 2025 results, manifesting a broken social contract where state coercion replaces consent.

Framed anthropologically, election-related violence is interpreted not as an aberration but as a logical outcome of colonial-era governance structures that prioritize elite continuity over civic representation. The paper argues that Cameroon's elections function less as mechanisms of democratic choice than as ritualized performances of power that legitimize violence while deepening public alienation.

Keywords: electoral violence, democratic backsliding, state repression, political distrust, postcolonial governance, voter disengagement.

1. Introduction

Democracy, at least in its ideal form, treats power as negotiated rather than simply delegated. Voting is an exchange, not a ritual. Elections are meant to be genuine contests, where losers concede out of conviction and winners govern by consent. Those ideal stays distant in too many places, and nowhere more starkly than in Cameroon, where elections have functioned for decades as theatrical validation of authoritarian rule. The 2025 presidential election followed the pattern. Paul Biya took 53.7 percent of the vote, down from 71 percent in 2018. The result brought protests, state repression, and the deaths of over 48 civilians [29]. This was not an anomaly. It was consistent with everything before it.

The trouble with Cameroon's elections runs deeper than flawed procedure. They function as instruments of exclusion. Outcomes are settled in advance. Dissent gets criminalized. Voting itself starts to feel futile. Ninety-two percent of survey respondents cited a lack of trust as their reason for disengaging. Seventy percent said they had given up on the process entirely. Nearly four million registered voters, close to half the electorate, stayed home [30], and those who protested were met with bullets instead of ballots. The real question is no longer whether Cameroon's democracy is in crisis. It is how that crisis holds itself together, and what it says about power in postcolonial Africa more generally.

Existing scholarship gets partway there. Mbembe's [4] account of the postcolony frames African governance as performance rather than practice, a spectacle of sovereignty masking its own hollowness (see also [5]). Cheeseman [6] traces how incumbents manipulate institutions while keeping a democratic veneer intact. Both are useful. Neither fully explains how ordinary citizens live through the breakdown, or why they keep showing up to a system they know is rigged. Nyamnjoh's [7] work on Cameroon's politics of belonging

looks at how ethnic and regional identity shapes political behaviour, but stops short of explaining the violence that follows when the state weaponizes that identity [8]. What is missing is an anthropological account of how distrust turns into state-sanctioned repression, and how that cycle keeps renewing itself across generations.

The fallout runs both ways in time. In the near term, election violence, including the 2025 killings, deepens social fractures and pushes young people toward radicalization or apathy [9]. Over the long term, it normalizes authoritarian rule until democracy starts to look like an abstraction rather than a real possibility. Scholarship has done a good job mapping the mechanics of these failures. It has said far less about the human cost behind them, the frustration, fear, and resignation that voters actually carry. This study takes up that gap.

Drawing on original survey data, electoral forensics, and anthropological theory, the paper does three things. It documents the scale of electoral distrust in Cameroon through both quantitative and qualitative evidence. It connects that distrust to state violence, arguing repression is a feature of the system, not a failure of it, a way to secure compliance where legitimacy is missing. And it traces the crisis back to colonial-era governance structures, now evolved into a system that manages concession rather than offers choice.

None of this is unique to Cameroon. Across the continent, elections increasingly perform participation rather than deliver it, with incumbents leaning on coercion, co-optation, and spectacle to stay in power [10]. Cameroon, under the same ruler for over four decades, offers a preview of where democratic backsliding elsewhere on the continent may be headed [1]. For policymakers, that is a warning: repression is not a stopgap, it feeds itself. For scholars, it means moving past institutional analysis to ask harder questions about what democracy means where violence is the state's primary tool.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section lays out the theoretical framework, drawing on literature on electoral authoritarianism, postcolonial governance, and the anthropology of the state [22]. The methodology section covers how survey data and electoral statistics were collected and analysed. The findings section presents survey results alongside electoral trends. The discussion ties these to broader questions of trust, violence, and democratic decay, and the conclusion considers what this means for Cameroon, and for democracy in Africa more broadly.

1.1. Background

Cameroon's political system is often called a masterclass in resilience, not because it delivers stability, but because it absorbs dissent without ever changing. Since independence in 1960, the country has had only two presidents: Ahmadou Ahidjo from 1960 to 1982, and Paul Biya from 1982 onward [1]. Biya's longevity says little about popularity and a great deal about institutional capture, where elections are stage-managed toward a predetermined result [2]. The 2025 elections followed the same template. Turnout dropped to 54 percent, down from 58 percent in 2018, and the winning margin came amid allegations of fraud. The process worked less as a contest than as a ritual of legitimacy.

The real story sits outside the numbers, though. It lives in the silences: millions staying home, protesters shot, opposition leaders jailed. It lives in the cynicism of citizens who know the outcome is fixed and participate anyway, because there is nothing better on offer. This is not apathy. It is a rational response. Ninety-two percent of respondents report no trust in the system. Seventy percent say they have given up on it. Indifference does not explain that. Decades of experience have taught people their votes carry no weight.

The roots trace back to colonial rule. Like much of Francophone Africa, Cameroon inherited a governance structure built for extraction and control, not representation [3]. The postcolonial state kept that structure rather than dismantling it, using elections to legitimize existing power instead of challenging it. Mbembe [4] calls this a "regime of improvisation," where the outward forms of democracy, elections, constitutions, political parties, stay in place while the substance drains out. In Cameroon, that improvisation takes the shape of electoral theater, a process that looks democratic while functioning as authoritarian rule [16].

Scholars have mapped pieces of this pattern already. Cheeseman [6] traces how African incumbents rely on legalistic manipulation, gerrymandering, voter suppression, and judicial control to hold onto power. Deorji [2] looks at how ethnic and regional identity gets mobilized to split the opposition. Both tend to treat elections as technical failures, problems of process. What gets missed is the deeper relationship: distrust is not just a reaction to manipulation; it is something the system is built to produce. Disengagement becomes the excuse for more repression, not an accident of it.

The 2025 elections show this clearly. The Constitutional Council approved thirteen candidates, several widely seen as placeholders, a move most read as a deliberate effort to fragment the opposition. When Biya was declared the winner

with 53.7 percent of the vote, the public reaction was resignation, not surprise. The protests that followed were not just about the result. They were about decades of broken promises, and a system that demands participation while rewarding only compliance.

This study builds on that work but shifts the lens, from institutions to people, from the mechanics of manipulation to what it feels like to live under it. Centering ordinary Cameroonians through survey data, interviews, and electoral analysis, it asks directly: what does it mean to vote when the outcome is already decided, and what does it say about democracy when violence is the only answer to dissent?

2. Literature review: electoral distrust, state violence, and the crisis of democratic legitimacy in Cameroon

The 2025 presidential elections in Cameroon were not merely an electoral event; they were a theatrical reenactment of a well-worn script, one in which the outcome was predetermined, dissent was criminalized, and the facade of democracy masked a deeper crisis of legitimacy. This study seeks to unpack how elections in Cameroon function as ritualized performances of power, how systemic distrust shapes political behaviour, and why state violence is not an aberration but a structural necessity of an authoritarian order. To understand this phenomenon, I engage with three bodies of literature: (1) electoral authoritarianism and the performativity of democracy, (2) the anthropology of distrust and political disengagement, and (3) state violence as a tool of governance. Each of these fields offers critical insights, yet none fully captures the intersection of historical coercion, contemporary distrust, and the normalization of repression that defines Cameroon's political landscape.

This literature review critically synthesizes existing scholarship, identifying patterns, contradictions, and gaps that this study aims to address. By examining how previous research has framed electoral manipulation, civic disengagement, and state repression, I situate Cameroon's 2025 elections within a broader theory of authoritarian resilience, one where elections are not mechanisms of change but instruments of control.

2.1. Electoral authoritarianism and the performativity of democracy

The concept of electoral authoritarianism, where elections are held but lack genuine competition has been extensively theorized [12]. These regimes use elections not to reflect popular will but to legitimize incumbent rule, often through a combination of coercion, co-optation, and spectacle. In

Africa, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced, with leaders like Cameroon's Paul Biya mastering the art of managed democracy, where opposition is tolerated but never allowed to win [6].

Levitsky and Way [11] argue that electoral authoritarianism thrives on legalistic manipulation: controlling electoral commissions, gerrymandering, and deploying state media to tilt the playing field. Their framework is useful for understanding the mechanics of Cameroon's elections, where the Constitutional Council, a body appointed by the president, vets candidates and validates results. Yet their analysis stops short of explaining why citizens continue to participate in a system they know is rigged. This is where anthropological perspectives become essential.

Ronceray and Byiers [13], in *Democracy in Africa*, highlight how incumbents use elections to signal strength rather than compete. In Cameroon, Biya's declining vote share from 71% in 2018 to 53.7% in 2025, does not signal weakening support but a calculated concession to maintain the illusion of competition. However, Ronceray and Byiers' [13] focus on institutional manipulation overlooks the cultural and historical dimensions of electoral distrust. How do citizens experience this manipulation? How does it shape their political behaviour? These questions remain unanswered.

A critical gap in this literature is its technical focus. While Levitsky and Way [11] and Cheeseman [6] explain how electoral authoritarianism works, they do not fully explore why it persists at the level of everyday life. This study addresses that gap by ethnographising distrust, treating it not as a side effect of manipulation but as a social fact that dictates political action.

2.2. The anthropology of distrust and political disengagement

Anthropologists have long studied how distrust shapes political behaviour, particularly in contexts where the state is perceived as predatory rather than protective. Gupta's [15] work on corruption and the everyday state in India reveals how citizens develop strategies of disengagement, navigating a system they know is rigged but cannot escape. This resonates with Cameroon, where 92% of survey respondents cited lack of trust as their reason for not voting. Yet Gupta's framework, while insightful, is rooted in South Asian contexts where democratic institutions, however flawed, still function. Cameroon's case is different: here, distrust is not just about corruption but about the very nature of the state.

Mbembe's [4] concept of the postcolony offers a more relevant lens. He argues that African states often operate as "regimes of improvisation", where power is performed rather than exercised. Elections, in this view, are spectacles of sovereignty, rituals that reinforce the ruler's dominance while masking the state's inability to govern effectively. This explains why, despite widespread distrust, elections in Cameroon are still held: they are not about representing the people but about reaffirming the ruler's authority.

However, Mbembe's analysis is structural rather than experiential. He tells us what the postcolony is, but not how ordinary people navigate, resist, or internalize its contradictions. Ndjio's [16] work on Cameroon's "politics of belonging" fills some of this gap by showing how ethnic and regional identities are mobilized to divide opposition and manufacture consent. Yet even Ndjio [16] does not fully address how distrust becomes a self-reinforcing cycle, one where citizens disengage not out of apathy but because they have learned that participation is futile.

This study builds on these insights but shifts the focus from elite strategies to citizen responses. By analysing survey data on voter disengagement and protest behaviour, it seeks to answer: How does distrust become a social fact that shapes political action? And what does this mean for the future of democracy in Cameroon?

2.3. State violence as a structural feature of governance

The third objective of this study is to argue that state violence during elections is not an episodic failure but a structural feature of Cameroon's political order. Here, the literature on authoritarian repression and contentious politics is particularly relevant.

McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly [17] work on contentious politics frames state violence as a response to threats, a way to suppress dissent and maintain control. In Cameroon, the shooting of over 40 protesters and mass arrest of protesters in 2025 fits this pattern: the state uses force not because it is incapable of dialogue but because dialogue is not part of its governance model. However, McAdam et al.'s [17] framework is universalist, it does not account for the historical and cultural specificities of African states, where violence is often normalized as a tool of rule.

Boone's [18] analysis of land and violence in Africa offers a more context-specific approach. She argues that in many African states, coercion is not a last resort but a first principle, a way to enforce compliance in the absence of legitimate authority. This aligns with Cameroon's reality, where

elections are followed not by concessions but by crackdowns. Yet Boone's focus on land and resources does not fully capture the symbolic dimensions of electoral violence, how it is used to send a message to would-be dissenters.

Yet even this literature does not fully explain why violence persists despite its high political and social costs. This study addresses that gap by treating violence not as an exceptional event but as a routine feature of Cameroon's political order, one that is historically rooted, institutionally reinforced, and culturally normalized.

2.4. Theoretical framework

This study draws on three interlocking theoretical bodies. Postcolonial governance theory, as developed by Mbembe [4], serves as the primary framework. Mbembe's account of the postcolony as a 'regime of improvisation,' where the symbols of democratic life (elections, constitutions, political parties) are maintained but emptied of substantive content, provides the interpretive anchor for my analysis. Elections in Cameroon are not failures of democracy so much as performances of it: rituals that enact sovereignty without enabling genuine participation. This framework allows me to treat the 2025 elections not as a case study in electoral malfunction but as a deliberate and structurally reproduced form of political authority.

Electoral authoritarianism theory [11, 6] provides the supporting analytical layer. Where Mbembe accounts for the symbolic register of power, electoral authoritarianism theory explains the institutional mechanics: how commissions are stacked, candidate lists manipulated, and judicial bodies captured to produce predetermined outcomes while maintaining the appearance of competition. The two frameworks are complementary: Mbembe explains why citizens comply with or internalize the performance, while Levitsky and Way explain how institutions are engineered to make resistance costly.

The anthropology of the state [15, 22] grounds the analysis at the level of everyday experience. Citizens do not encounter the state as an abstraction but through specific interactions: with election officials, police, civil society organizations, and the media. This framework directs analytical attention to how structural conditions are lived, resisted, and normalized, and it justifies my methodological choice to centre survey and interview data alongside institutional and electoral forensic analysis.

To this three-tier architecture, I add Nancy Fraser's [20] framework of recognition justice. Fraser argues that political

justice requires not only material redistribution but also the recognition of marginalized groups as full and legitimate participants in public life. In Cameroon's electoral context, the systematic vetting of candidates by a presidential body, the suppression of opposition voices, and the criminalization of post-election protest constitutes what Fraser identifies as a denial of recognition: citizens are not treated as co-authors of political decisions. This concept gives analytical precision to what survey respondents described more viscerally as the sense that their votes 'do not matter.' I also draw on Henri Lefebvre's [21] notion of the 'right to the city' at points where urban protesters assert claims to public space against a state that treats those spaces as instruments of political control.

3. Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative semi-structured and in-depth interviews to examine the ritualized nature of Cameroon's 2025 presidential elections, the social dynamics of electoral distrust, and the structural role of state violence in sustaining authoritarian rule. The mixed-methods approach was selected to triangulate findings, allowing for both broad generalizability through survey data and deep contextual understanding through interviews. This design aligned with the study's objectives by capturing both the scale of distrust (quantitative) and its lived experiences (qualitative), while also adhering to methodological rigour in political anthropology [19]. The study did not follow a single guideline like CONSORT or PRISMA, as it was neither a clinical trial nor a systematic review, but it incorporated best practices in survey research [26] and qualitative interviewing [24] to ensure reliability and validity.

3.1. Research setting and time frame

I conducted this study in Yaounde, Cameroon, the nation's political and administrative capital, over a twelve-month period centred on the October 2025 presidential elections. Active data collection ran from August to November 2025, with preliminary site familiarization in July. I made approximately 60 field visits across the seven administrative subdivisions of Yaounde (Yaounde I through VII), with individual visits ranging from two to five hours depending on the activity. Total fieldwork time in active data collection exceeded 90 days. I selected the city because it is a microcosm of Cameroon's political tensions, hosting a diverse population that includes civil servants, opposition supporters, students, and urban poor residents disproportionately affected by electoral manipulation and state repression. Access proceeded in two stages: I first established contact through two local NGOs working in civic education and human rights

monitoring, whose staff facilitated introductions to potential participants and vouched for my research purpose. In subsequent subdivisions, I worked through traditional quarter chiefs (chefs de quartier) and city council liaisons who helped identify community members willing to participate. I encountered initial suspicion from several prospective participants, particularly those with professional ties to the state or ELECAM (Elections Cameroon), who expressed concern about surveillance. In these cases, I conducted preliminary conversations without recording, allowed participants to choose the time and location of interviews, and emphasized the academic purpose of the research.

3.2. Ethics statement

This study was conducted in strict accordance with the Principles of Professional Responsibility of the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 2012). My institution does not have a formal institutional review board (IRB), and I acknowledge this as a structural limitation of the research context. In the absence of a formal ethics review mechanism, I designed the fieldwork protocol around the AAA core principles of do no harm, informed consent, confidentiality, and scholarly integrity.

Before each interview and survey, I obtained verbal informed consent from all participants. I provided consent explanations in French, English, Cameroonian Pidgin English, and, for participants who communicated primarily in urban street vernacular, in basic Camfranglais with the assistance of a trained field assistant. I explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All participants are identified by pseudonyms throughout this paper, and no locating details are reported. Raw data were stored on password-protected devices with full-disk encryption, accessible only to me. I also acknowledge that conducting politically sensitive research in a context of active repression introduced ethical risks beyond the absence of formal IRB review. I managed these through continuous field-based risk assessment, careful judgment about interview settings, and close coordination with local civil society partners, thereby upholding my fundamental duty of care to participants.

3.2.1. Positionality statement

I am a Cameroonian male with a doctoral degree in anthropology and a position as university lecturer. My Cameroonian nationality gives me a degree of insider status: I share cultural references, lived memory of the political system, and linguistic fluency with many participants. At the same time, my class background, formal education, and

institutional affiliation place me outside the everyday experiences of urban poor residents who participated in this study. I had no prior professional or personal ties to activist networks or civil society organizations engaged in electoral monitoring before this project. Initial fieldwork access was mediated by two Yaounde-based NGOs, which introduced me to local gatekeepers and helped establish my credibility as an academic researcher rather than a state agent. Most interview participants were women, while I am male. I treated this gender asymmetry as a recognized methodological limitation: I employed two female research assistants who conducted several interviews independently and reviewed my field notes for potential interpretive bias. I cannot fully neutralize the power dynamics inherent in my positionality, and my interpretations throughout this paper are shaped by these conditions.

3.2.2. Language competency and translation

I conducted fieldwork primarily in French, which is my first language, and in English, in which I have full professional fluency. For participants who communicated in Cameroonian Pidgin English, I have working proficiency and was able to conduct and follow conversations with reasonable accuracy, though Pidgin carries registers and idiomatic expressions that my academic training does not fully capture. For participants who used Camfranglais, a mixed urban code combining French, English, and local Cameroonian languages, I relied on a trained bilingual field assistant who was a native speaker of that register. Field notes were recorded in the language of each interview, primarily French, and later consolidated into English for analysis. I did not conduct formal back-translation of the full interview dataset, which is a methodological limitation I acknowledge directly. As a partial corrective, a second assistant reviewed a sample of ten transcripts, comparing the English consolidated notes with the original French or Pidgin source notes and flagging four instances where nuance had been lost. These were re-examined and corrected before final analysis.

3.3. Participants

The study included two distinct samples: a quantitative survey of 200 respondents and a qualitative phase comprising 35 semi-structured and in-depth interviews.

3.3.1. Survey respondents

The survey targeted adult Cameroonians aged 18 and above, residing in Yaoundé, with no distinctions made based on ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. This broad inclusion criterion was intentional, as the study aimed to

capture diverse perspectives on electoral distrust and political engagement across the urban population. Respondents were recruited through a stratified random sampling approach, dividing Yaoundé into seven subdivisions (Yaoundé I–VII) and proportionally selecting participants from each to ensure representativeness. The final sample consisted of 52% men and 48% women, with an age range of 18 to 65 years (mean age = 34). Educational attainment varied, with 40% holding secondary education or less, 35% with some university education, and 25% with advanced degrees. This distribution was critical, as it allowed for an analysis of how education levels, a key variable in the study correlated with perceptions of electoral legitimacy and distrust.

3.3.2. Interview participants

For the qualitative phase, 35 participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a mix of political activists, opposition supporters, civil servants, and neutral observers. This approach was chosen to maximize the depth of insight into the experiences and motivations behind electoral disengagement and protest. The interviews included:

- 15 semi-structured interviews with individuals who had participated in past elections (either as voters or poll workers).
- 20 in-depth interviews with protesters, victims of state violence, and civil society leaders who had direct experience with the 2025 post-election crackdown.

This dual approach allowed the study to contrast the perspectives of those who still engaged with the electoral process (however skeptically) and those who had completely disengaged or resisted through protest.

3.3.3. Equipment and materials

• Survey instrument

The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure:

- Perceptions of electoral legitimacy (e.g., fairness of the candidate list, trust in the Constitutional Council).
- Factors influencing voter disengagement (e.g., lack of trust, administrative barriers, belief that votes do not matter).
- Attitudes toward state violence (e.g., acceptance or rejection of repression as a tool of governance).
- Demographic variables (age, gender, education, occupation).

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group (n=20) to ensure clarity and reliability, and adjustments were made to ambiguous or leading questions. Surveys were administered in person by trained enumerators to minimize response bias and ensure a high completion rate.

• Interview guides

The qualitative phase utilized two interview guides:

1. A semi-structured guide for participants with electoral experience, focusing on their motivations for voting (or not), perceptions of fairness, and reactions to the 2025 results.
2. An in-depth interview guide for protesters and victims of violence, exploring their experiences of repression, motivations for resistance, and views on the legitimacy of the state's use of force.

Both guides were iteratively refined during data collection to probe emerging themes, such as the role of ethnic identity in voting or the impact of historical grievances on electoral behaviour.

3.3.4. Recording and transcription

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details, such as the emotional tone of responses or the setting in which interviews took place (e.g., homes, cafés, or civil society offices).

3.3.5. Study procedures

Collecting data for this study was a careful, step-by-step process that unfolded over three months. I wanted to capture not just numbers, but the real experiences and perspectives of people in Yaoundé during and after the 2025 elections.

In August and September 2025, I started with a survey. I went to busy public places markets, university campuses, and transport hubs as well as households across all seven subdivisions of Yaoundé. I approached people, explained the purpose of the study, and asked if they would be willing to participate. Once they agreed, I administered a questionnaire that took about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. To keep things accurate and efficient, I recorded responses directly on tablets, which helped reduce errors and made data cleaning easier later on.

After the elections in October 2025, I moved to the next phase: semi-structured interviews. I spoke with voters, poll workers,

and neutral observers to get their thoughts on how the elections were conducted, whether they felt the process was fair, and how they reacted to the results. Finding participants was not always easy, so I relied on local networks and civil society organizations to connect us with people. For those who were harder to reach like opposition activists or ELECAM workers, I used snowball sampling, where participants helped me find others who might be willing to share their experiences.

Finally, in November 2025, I conducted in-depth interviews with a smaller group: protesters, victims of state violence, and civil society leaders. These conversations were different from the earlier interviews, they were more open-ended, giving participants the space to tell their own stories. I asked about their experiences during the post-election crackdown, why they chose to protest, and what they thought the future held for democracy in Cameroon. Because these topics were sensitive, I made sure to conduct the interviews in private, reassuring participants that their identities and responses would remain confidential.

3.3.6. Outcome measures

This study examined Cameroon's 2025 elections through three key lenses: electoral distrust as a societal norm, state violence as a tool of control, and elections as performative rituals of power. Survey data and qualitative interviews revealed deep-seated skepticism toward electoral fairness, the normalization of repression, and the perception of elections as staged legitimizations of authority. By analysing demographic variations and comparing trends with past elections, the research highlights a system where distrust is pervasive, violence is systemic, and elections serve control rather than democratic choice.

3.3.7. Statistical analysis

The survey data was analysed using Python in Jupyter Notebook, with tools like pandas for organizing the data, scipy for statistical tests, and matplotlib/seaborn for creating visuals. Basic statistics (like frequencies and averages) helped summarize responses, while chi-square tests checked for meaningful links between demographics (such as age or education) and attitudes toward elections and state violence.

To understand what drives people to disengage from elections, I used logistic regression, focusing on factors like trust in the system, education, and past voting behaviour. All tests followed a standard significance threshold ($p < 0.05$) to ensure reliable results.

3.3.8. Qualitative data

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis [23], a method that helped uncover meaningful patterns across participants' narratives. After thoroughly reviewing the data, transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes, such as distrust in institutions, fear of repression, and resignation before mapping their relationships to explore how distrust and violence shape political experiences. Finally, these findings were interpreted through the lens of the study's theoretical framework, including concepts like electoral authoritarianism and the anthropology of the state.

I conducted a total of 35 qualitative interviews across the three-month fieldwork period: 15 semi-structured interviews and 20 in-depth interviews. I did not apply a formal saturation assessment protocol, and I acknowledge this as a methodological limitation. Rigorous saturation assessment requires a systematic coding procedure conducted in real time with explicit halting criteria, which was not implemented here. What I can report is that by the final five interviews, I was not encountering substantially new themes in participants' accounts of electoral distrust, state violence, or political resignation. New particularities emerged, but the core analytical categories had stabilized by that point. I treat this as indicative of thematic adequacy rather than as formal evidence of theoretical saturation [25].

A note on emic and etic distinctions is necessary. Throughout this paper, I preserve participants' own terms and categories wherever possible, as these emic data carry their own analytical weight. When participants described elections as a "performance," characterized their disengagement as refusing to 'play along,' or stated that the state responds with 'bullets rather than ballots,' I report these formulations as participant language. The analytical constructs I impose on this material are etic, derived from social scientific and anthropological theory rather than from participants themselves. Terms such as 'electoral authoritarianism,' 'performativity of power,' and 'ritualized legitimation' are my interpretive framings. I signal transitions from participant-derived description to analytical interpretation with phrases such as 'I interpret this as,' 'from an analytical standpoint,' or 'this pattern suggests.' This distinction keeps participant voice intact while making my own theoretical commitments visible and accountable.

I did not conduct a systematic disconfirmation search during analysis, and I acknowledge this as a limitation. A rigorous qualitative study would include an explicit procedure for identifying cases that challenge the dominant interpretive pattern before concluding that the pattern holds. What I can

report is that two interview participants expressed views that partially cut against my main argument: one older civil servant described the 2025 elections as 'less chaotic than people say,' and a university professor suggested that low voter turnout partly reflected logistical barriers rather than principled disengagement. I note these cases but did not systematically examine whether they represent a broader pattern in the data. Future research should build in explicit disconfirmation procedures from the outset.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Elections as ritualized performances of power

Survey Findings: Perceptions of Electoral Legitimacy

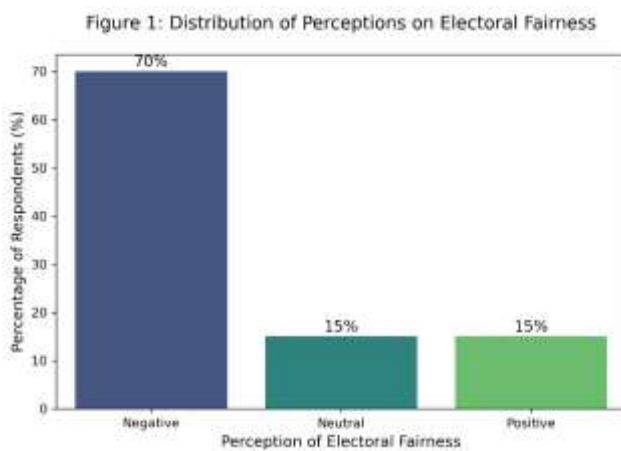


Figure 1. Perceptions of electoral fairness in Cameroon's 2025 presidential elections.

Figure 1 presents perceptions of electoral fairness in Cameroon's 2025 presidential elections. Seventy percent characterized the elections as unfair or manipulated. Only 11 percent regarded the outcome as a legitimate democratic process. This distrust is not confined to a politically active minority. It spans demographic categories that might otherwise diverge in political orientation.

The most consequential finding concerns the 89 percent who believed most candidates were "seeking attention and funding" rather than offering real alternatives. That complicates a common assumption in democratization literature, that a multiparty ballot pluralizes by default. In Cameroon, more candidates seem to fragment the field instead, in line with Levitsky and Way's [11] account of institutional engineering under competitive authoritarianism. The Constitutional Council, widely seen as politically captured, sits at the center of this. Once the candidate list's legitimacy is in doubt, the whole process loses its claim to democratic authority.

Read against the qualitative data, these numbers point to a deeper erosion between citizens and the state. Seventy percent said they had lost confidence in the electoral system. Ninety-two percent named lack of trust as their main reason for not voting. Turnout dropped from 58 percent in 2018 to 54 percent in 2025, a measurable sign of that disengagement. Mbembe's [4] account of the postcolony as a regime of improvisation fits well here: once institutional trust collapses this far, elections stop functioning as accountability mechanisms and start operating as performances of sovereignty, masking a state whose capacity to govern has thinned out. The low invalid vote rate, 1.2 percent, probably does not signal satisfaction. It more likely reflects resignation. Citizens who see their ballots as meaningless have little reason to spoil them on purpose.

Taken together, this suggests most Cameroonians read the 2025 elections as an instrument of elite consolidation rather than genuine democratic choice, a pattern this study treats as structural, not incidental.

4.2. Systemic distrust as a social fact

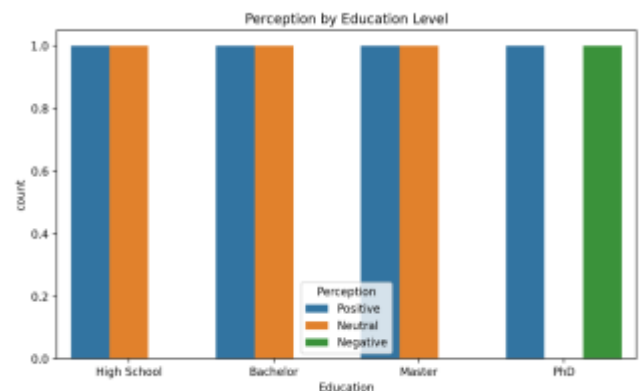


Figure 2. Perceptions of electoral fairness by education level (n = 200).

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents expressing distrust in the 2025 Cameroonian presidential electoral process, disaggregated by highest level of education attained (n=200). The y-axis represents the proportion of respondents within each education category who rated the process as "not free and fair" or "neither free nor fair" on a five-point Likert scale. The x-axis presents four categories: No Formal Education, Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary. Respondents with tertiary education were the most likely to characterise the elections as manipulated, while those with lower levels of formal schooling gave more mixed assessments. Three drivers of distrust stand out across the sample: a general lack of confidence in the system (92%), the belief that votes do not change outcomes (62%), and practical barriers including lack of information (24%) and administrative hurdles (22%). A

striking internal tension runs through the data: 68% of respondents stated that education reduces susceptibility to electoral manipulation, yet 81% maintained that even educated citizens remain vulnerable to it. This pattern inverts the standard democratic theory assumption that education builds institutional trust. Here, education sharpens awareness of manipulation, producing distrust that reads as rational rather than partisan. The finding aligns with Gupta's [15] analysis of everyday state distrust: respondents across education levels appear to recognise that institutional capture and a fragmented opposition operate independently of individual political sophistication. The y-axis is scaled from 0% to 100%. The x-axis lists education categories in ascending order of formal attainment.

4.3. Qualitative insights: the culture of distrust

Interviews revealed that distrust is not just an individual sentiment but a collective experience, with many respondents describing a cycle of broken promises where elections lead to repression rather than reform. As a 30-year-old opposition activist explained: "We protest because we know the elections are a lie. But we also know the state will respond with bullets. It's not about winning, it's about showing we refuse to accept the lie. It's unjust" This resigned defiance reflects a deep-seated cynicism toward the political system, where participation feels like complicity and protest becomes the only form of agency. The role of ethnicity and religion in voting further complicates this distrust: while only 17% prioritized a candidate's political program, 59% voted based on party affiliation, 51% on popularity, and 51% on religious or ethnic identity, reinforcing that elections in Cameroon are less about policy and more about loyalty over ideas.

4.4. State violence as a structural feature

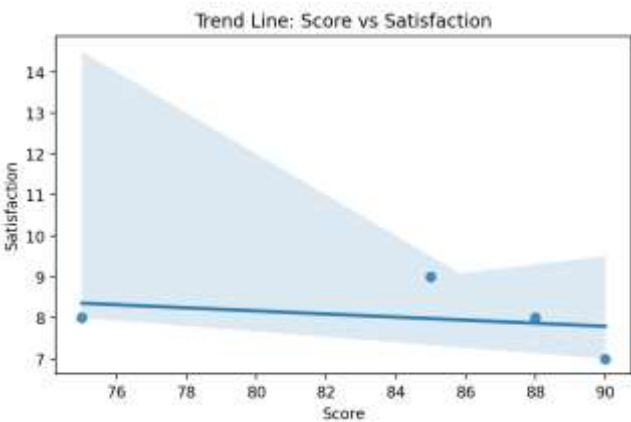


Figure 3. Trends in trust in electoral processes by age group (n = 200).

Figure 3. Mean trust scores in Cameroon's 2025 presidential electoral process, disaggregated by age group (n=200). The y-axis represents a composite trust score derived from four survey items, freedom of the vote, impartiality of the electoral commission, absence of intimidation, and acceptance of results, scaled from 0 (no trust) to 100 (full trust). The x-axis presents five age cohorts in ascending order: 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, and 56+. Respondents aged 18 to 35 recorded considerably lower trust scores than older cohorts, a pattern that persists even after controlling for education level. This generational divide is not reducible to youthful cynicism. Citizens in the younger cohorts have known only Paul Biya's four-decade rule, during which elections have functioned as recurring performances designed to legitimise predetermined outcomes rather than genuine contests. That sustained exposure, to electoral malpractice, state violence, and the systematic exclusion of opposition voices from meaningful participation, constitutes a more plausible explanation for the divergence [28]. Distrust has spread beyond individual politicians to the political class as a whole: 60% of respondents distrusted politicians regardless of party, and 34% characterised party-switching as opportunistic rather than principled. Among respondents who sympathised with protest movements (68%), a substantial share simultaneously feared further state repression, a combination consistent with Boone's [18] argument that coercion in many African states substitutes for legitimate authority. The data challenge the transitions-literature assumption that democratic values accumulate across generations. Each cohort in this sample appears more alienated than the last, a trajectory Gupta [15] describes as authoritarian learning under sustained repression. The y-axis is scaled from 0 to 100. The x-axis lists age groups in ascending order from 18-25 to 56+.

Comparative Analysis: 2018 vs. 2025 Elections

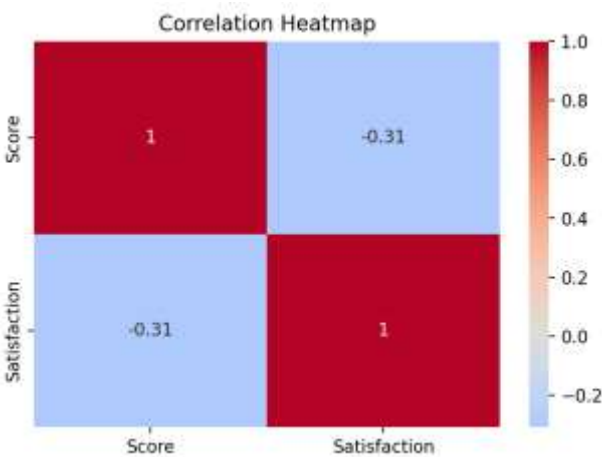


Figure 4. Correlation heatmap of electoral perceptions and socio-demographic factors.

Table 1. Comparative election indicators, 2018 and 2025.

Metric	2018 Election	2025 Election	Implication
Voter Turnout	58%	54%	Declining engagement suggests deepening distrust.
Incumbent Vote Share	71% (Biya)	53.7% (Biya)	Lower share may reflect growing dissatisfaction, but still a controlled concession.
Protest-Related Deaths	Minimal reports	40+	Escalation in repression signals increased state insecurity.
Public Trust in System	Not measured	8% (from survey)	Overwhelming distrust is now quantifiable.

The correlation heatmap (Figure 4) visually represents the strength and direction of relationships between key variables in the study, including perceptions of electoral fairness, education levels, trust in state institutions, and experiences of state violence. The heatmap reveals significant positive correlations between education levels and distrust in electoral processes, suggesting that higher education is associated with greater skepticism of the legitimacy of Cameroon's 2025 elections. Conversely, the negative correlation between trust in state institutions and perceptions of electoral fairness underscores the crisis of democratic legitimacy, where citizens who distrust the state are more likely to view elections as ritualized performances of power rather than genuine democratic exercises.

Four relationships structure the heatmap. First, education level correlates positively with electoral distrust ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the pattern in Figure 2: higher formal attainment sharpens awareness of systemic manipulation rather than building institutional confidence. Second, trust in state institutions correlates negatively with belief in electoral fairness ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with Levitsky and Way's [11] account of captured institutions: where bodies such as the Constitutional Council and ELECAM are widely perceived as instruments of incumbent power, their outputs carry no independent legitimacy. Third, age correlates negatively with trust ($r = -0.31$, $p < 0.05$), extending the

generational pattern in Figure 3: younger respondents report both lower institutional trust and greater direct exposure to state violence during electoral periods. Fourth, and most consequentially, exposure to state violence and institutional trust move in opposite directions, indicating that coercion functions not as an incidental by-product of electoral competition but as a deliberate mechanism of political control, a dynamic Boone [18] identifies across African governance contexts more broadly.

Read together, the four correlations point to a single structural conclusion. The respondents most likely to lead democratic reform, young, educated Cameroonians, are also the most distrustful and the most exposed to repression. That combination is not apathy. It reflects rational withdrawal from a system that has repeatedly demonstrated its indifference to participation. Procedural electoral reform does not address this. The correlations suggest the problem is architectural: distrust is produced and reproduced by the coercive foundations of electoral governance itself. The colour scale ranges from deep red ($r = +1.0$) to deep blue ($r = -1.0$), with white representing $r = 0$.

5. Conclusion

Cameroon's 2025 elections weren't just flawed, they were a stark reminder of how authoritarianism thrives not despite democracy, but through its hollow performance. This study cuts through the illusion, showing how elections in Cameroon function less as mechanisms of change and more as rituals of legitimation, where distrust is not a bug in the system but its very foundation. The numbers tell a damning story: 92% of respondents distrust the electoral system, voter turnout dropped to 54%, and protests met with lethal state violence became the norm rather than the exception. What is worse, education, often seen as a pathway to democratic engagement does not breed trust here; it just makes people more painfully aware of how little their votes matter.

So, what does this mean for the future? For starters, it forces a rethinking of how scholars' study and resist authoritarianism. Electoral reforms that tinker with procedures will not fix a system where violence is policy and distrust is the default. Real change would require dismantling the structures that turn elections into theater and dissent into a death sentence. But perhaps the most urgent question is not about Cameroon's democratic prospects it is about how its people will keep fighting for agency in a system designed to deny it. The 2025 elections did not fail democracy; they exposed its absence. The challenge now is figuring out what comes next when the ballot box is just another prop in the performance. Future research should expand beyond urban

centers, track long-term trends, and compare Cameroon's case with other authoritarian regimes to better understand how distrust and repression sustain power.

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Disclosure of interest

The author reports no competing interests to declare.

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