

Digital Democracy

Decoding Social Media's Role in Electoral Outcomes



Internews

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Research Framework

Problem Statement

Social media can act as a double-edged sword during elections - it can be a potent instrument for participation and dialogue, yet also a perilous source of false information, division, magnification of radical viewpoints, and exploitation of public sentiment. The ramifications of election-related disinformation are well-documented in the countries of the Global North, with social media corporations even summoned to the US Senate due to their inadequate response to election manipulation on their platforms in during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections. Despite this, research into the effects of social media in the Global South and the typical methods through which it can destabilize democratic procedures is scant. This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap, laying the groundwork for a more integrative, comprehensive approach to research and the development of solutions that follow.

Research Questions

- Is social media abused across all societies or does it only target “global powers”?
- How can we break down electoral disinformation trends?
- How does electoral disinformation manifest in different contexts?
- What can we learn from successful countermeasures against electoral disinformation campaigns?

Hypothesis

Given the global influence of social media, we hypothesize that issues such as misinformation, disinformation, and breaches of electoral integrity, observed in Global North countries, have worldwide implications with context-specific variations. We propose that a collaborative effort from governments, tech platforms, and civil society across the globe is essential to address these challenges. This effort should involve not only the removal and improved moderation of content that violates electoral norms but also a significant investment in digital literacy initiatives.

Furthermore, we hypothesize that different democratic models display distinct disinformation trends, necessitating tailored strategies to counter disinformation based on the specific democratic context and prevalent disinformation trends in each country.



Research Methods

The research employs a qualitative approach using mixed methods including social media monitoring and analysis, participant observation, and a review of pertinent literature and research. Local researchers' monitoring and analysis is based on Internews' Harmful Speech Watch methodology — please follow this [link for more information](#) *[internal only]*.

Researchers are drawn from wide demographic, linguistic, and geographic areas to provide local insight, expertise, and context to identified harmful content. The research team includes civil society activists, journalists, academics, humanitarian professionals, and legal experts.

Country desk reviews were independently compiled ahead of the monitoring period to identify important topics, relating to protection of civic space, which sparked significant offline consequences.

The content monitored focuses predominantly on Facebook, due to the platform accounting for the highest social media penetration globally. However, it also encompasses other platforms and attempts to gauge cross-platform migration.

Researchers use their local knowledge of social media environments to identify problematic accounts, groups, pages, and other online content. Their monitoring had been supported by [CrowdTangle](#), a now [semi-defunct](#) social media analytics tool used to track how content spreads around the web.

Harmful Speech Watch relies on a manual process for collecting and categorizing online harmful speech. Content is classified according to platform defined content violations, as well as categories which partners deem violating within the local context, considering the influence of the author, and potential to incite violence.

The research employs discourse and content analysis to examine potential hate messages within each social and political context to understand meanings, motivations, and ideologies behind harmful content. Partners also compile and track linguistic features and nuance (such as non-standard spelling and grammar, veiled or coded language, allusions, metaphors, slang, and the use of multiple languages) to shed greater insight on harmful terminology that may not be detected by software. Harmful Speech Watch does not track trends in frequency or location but aims to shed light on the construction and manifestation of how harmful online narratives may influence recipients.



Limitations on Research

- The research focuses on a limited number of countries that were selected based on their positioning on the [Global Democracy Index](#) and is not exhaustive.
- The Harmful Speech Watch methodology does not track trends in frequency or location but aims to shed light on the construction and manifestation of how harmful online narratives may influence recipients.
- The study only covers examples from the immediate run-up or aftermath of elections and does not take in more insidious, long-term narratives that may impact political participation.

Research Findings

Common Findings

Our study reveals a significant correlation between the patterns of online electoral mis-/disinformation and a country's standing on the Global Democracy Index. These harmful behaviors' manifestations online were not random or arbitrary; rather, they conformed to certain patterns that seemed influenced by the country's democratic standing.

In nations that scored higher on the democracy index, we noted a specific set of mis-/disinformation behaviors. These were often marked by nuanced tactics and advanced use of technology. By contrast, countries with lower democratic scores displayed more blatant, direct tactics, frequently coupled with coercive measures. Notably, full democracies appear to be more proactive in countering mis-/disinformation, whereas mis-/disinformation becomes less relevant in authoritarian regimes. This finding underscores the intricate interplay among political context, societal factors, and the propagation of online mis-/disinformation.

It is important to recognize that these findings serve as indicators rather than definitive conclusions, paving the way for future projects to explore the complex dynamics between a country's democratic standing and online mis-/disinformation patterns. By incorporating these patterns into their methodologies, future studies can provide more nuanced and contextually accurate insights. This, in turn, can inform the development of effective strategies to counter these harmful behaviors.

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and contextually accurate insights into online mis-/disinformation. This, in turn, could help devise more effective strategies to counter such harmful behaviors.

Electoral Archetypes

While these trends are global, different political systems can be impacted in very different ways. The effect varies both across the democracy index and depends mainly on three political actors: domestic opposition, external forces, and the governing regime.

Depending on the government's ability to utilize digital technology and how it uses social media, there are four different effects that platforms can have: It can amplify authoritarian regimes' official narratives and help consolidate their hold. It can be used to destabilize and spark violent in hybrid regimes and have a radicalizing effect on flawed democracies. It can also prompt strong democratic governments to take rigorous measures to improve media literacy to counter the use of social media to influence elections.

Flawed democracies appear to employ polarizing populist rhetoric; hybrid regimes appear more susceptible to coordinated inauthentic behavior; authoritarian regimes may see some examples of vote fixing or attempts to damage electoral integrity — however there tends to be less polarizing debate and discussion. It is no coincidence that these countries are among the [most violent](#) in the world and thus there is likely to be greater fear of violent repercussions.

Academic studies mirror this analysis, noting four types of social media driven political impacts.

The Four Types of Political Effects of Social Media Platforms		
	Democratic Regime	Authoritarian Regime
Strong State	<i>Weakening effect</i>	<i>Intensifying effect</i>
Weak State	<i>Radicalizing effect</i>	<i>Destabilizing effect</i>

Figure 1. A study by [Texas University](#) considered states to be impacted by social media in four different ways according to the state's strength and level of democracy.

Full Democracies (Proactive Approaches and Critical Thinking)

A noticeable trend to observers of social media information campaigns is that countries that top the [Global Democracy Index](#) also tend to be less impacted by harmful speech campaigns



during electoral periods. An overview of pre-electoral measures taken in those countries reveal that most states in this category took robust steps to improve media and digital literacy among their citizens.

Most of these countries top the EU-focused [Open Society Institute's](#) and US-based [Media Literacy Now's](#) media literacy indices. Media literacy refers to people's ability to critically engage with information and media in all aspects of their life. At the heart of this critical engagement is the ability to critique media and information as well as media technologies and business models.

This is not to say that these countries have not been targeted by coordinated online harmful speech campaigns. A [study by "EU vs. Disinfo"](#) showed that **Nordic** countries had been systematically targeted by pro-Kremlin online campaigns that sought to shape the outcome of their democratic processes in the favor of Moscow.

While such online campaigns have been shown to have huge impacts on electoral processes in other countries, Nordic states have shown considerable resilience by proactively engaging with the European Union and NATO to develop multinational research centers and counter-measures such as identifying and responding to disinformation. They also rolled out accessible training courses and workshops on identifying malicious information that are delivered at schools, community centers and to public sector workers.

Finland's government launched its initiative in 2014, a full two years before Russia intervened in the US Presidential Elections. The initiatives aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists, and politicians how [to counter false information](#) designed to sow division. By 2015, Finland's president called on every Finn to take responsibility for the fight against false information. A year later, Finland brought in American experts to advise officials on how to recognize fake news, understand why it goes viral and develop strategies to fight it. [The education system was also reformed](#) to emphasize critical thinking.



Figure 2. Twitter mistakenly verified an account falsely claiming to be that of the Norwegian Finance Minister that circulated misinformation ahead of the country's elections.

Similarly, [ahead of its 2018 elections](#), **Sweden** (also a frequent target of Kremlin-sponsored disinformation) invested in building up the resilience of institutions and society overall to withstand information influence activities. The agency trained thousands of civil servants, built, and strengthened interagency coordination structures, coordinated with traditional and social media, raised public awareness, and monitored the digital information landscape. Despite a cyberattack on the Swedish Election Authority website that fanned claims of fraud and generated a flood of homegrown political disinformation, the election ran smoothly, and the government doubled down on the resilience-building approach for protecting the 2022 election.

The **Norwegian** government must also be lauded for its proactive approach to combatting electoral misinformation and harmful speech. Ahead of the 2021 elections, it formed a working group chaired by the Local Government and Modernization Ministry which included ministries of defense, justice, foreign affairs, as well as the [Norwegian Media Authority](#) and civil society actors. This approach ensured a more holistic and comprehensive approach to the problem. The [working group announced 13 measures](#) that engaged politicians, voters, media outlets and social media platforms. These measures included: Extensive research, risk assessment, technical and security advice to candidates, awareness raising campaigns to strengthen voters' critical media understanding, and training on fake news and misinformation for seniors, among other measures.

While none of these strategies have rendered these countries immune to electoral misinformation, whether it be in the mainstream or on social media, the populations have proven to be considerably more resilient to the impacts, ensuring smoother democratic processes than displayed among “flawed democracies” that score lower on both democracy and media literacy indices.

Flawed Democracies (Politicians Actively Exploiting Populist Rhetoric)

Internews' research encompasses several countries that are defined as “flawed democracies” according to the Global Democracy Index. All these countries display strong populist political trends alongside polarized media and lower levels of media literacy.

Populism and weaker information environments are driven by declining confidence in the trustworthiness of the news media. This has seen many opponents of the mainstream narrative (whether accurate or inaccurate) to take to social media as an outlet for countering perceived pro-establishment bias of mainstream media. Algorithms which are designed to maximize users' engagement facilitate the congregation of politically disgruntled individuals online that

places them in an echo chamber that ultimately can lead to mobilization of militant support for anti-establishment candidates.

Recent examples of this radicalizing effect can be found in the rise of former President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

Political populism has seen a resurgence among leaders in countries classified as “flawed democracies” whereby they commonly leverage social media platforms, to attack opponents. Crucially, their hardline rhetoric also helps to shift discourse norms in society, making it is more acceptable among more people to denigrate and attack other communities.

The **Philippines** May 9, 2022 elections saw incumbent President Rodrigo Duterte employ populist strategies to promote Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Duterte. Duterte is a populist figure who portrays himself as a bombastic, outspoken man of the people

Internews researchers observed that approval of Rodrigo Duterte correlated closely with support for Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and his running mate Sara Duterte, daughter of the former president.

Duterte’s own presidential campaign tapped into social media virality in the Philippines. A strategy which has been particularly effective during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring a rapt audience. Duterte assembled [an army of internet trolls](#) tasked to “amplify” his message throughout Filipino cyberspace. These trolls spread propaganda for the president and continue to spread messages supporting his policies.

Duterte often employed slurs and false accusations to discredit his opponents, these in turn were repeated and amplified online. For instance in response to Senator Leila de Lima’s initiating a senate investigation into President Rodrigo Duterte’s “War on Drugs,” Duterte [openly attempted to discredit her](#) in a speech, calling her “immoral” and accusing her of having a “driver and lover.” He said that “De Lima is not only screwing her driver, but she is also screwing the nation,” Duterte said, adding that if he were De Lima, he would hang himself. De Lima, a lawyer, human rights activist, politician, law professor, and vocal critic of Duterte’s administration, had announced her intention to run in the 2022 elections.



Figure 3. Post describes De Lima as a “Penis Queen.”

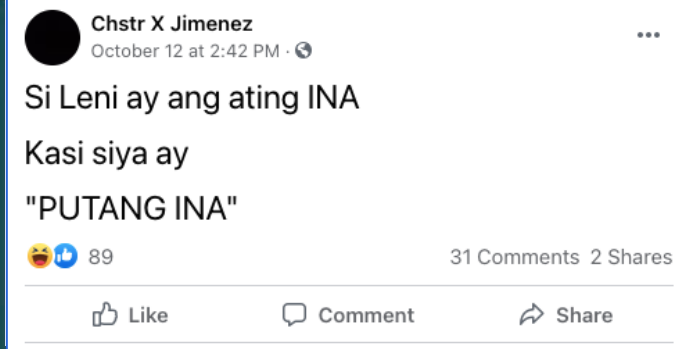


Figure 4. Post describing Robredo as a “whore mother” in reference to her daughter’s alleged sex tape.

Social media platforms were relatively proactive in responding to Duterte’s online misinformation and defamatory initiatives. Facebook removed [scores of accounts](#) associated with the Philippines Security Services in 2020 and was slammed by Duterte for “engaging in biased censorship.” The president said that Facebook could not “bar or prevent [him] from espousing the objectives of government,” also accusing the platform of “encouraging” communists by blocking the security services’ online campaign. The platform continued to [remove hundreds of accounts](#) as the wave of online misinformation heightened in the run up to the May 9, 2022 election.

Duterte’s social media strategy was replicated in support of Ferdinand Marcos Jr, and his running mate Sara Duterte, daughter of the incumbent president. Observers noted that misinformation and harassment were rife in the run up to the election. Journalists said false news and online attacks made reporting on the elections challenging. A reporter told [Voice of America](#) that “fake news has become so believable that the public thinks it’s true. It has become so pervasive in society.”

Vice President Leni Robredo, Marcos Jr’s strongest opponent, was particularly targeted by online disinformation since announcing her candidacy. A study on election-related disinformation by [local fact check site Vera Files](#) said Robredo was the main target, including through statements falsely attributed to her.

Assaults on Robredo, both online and offline, brought her sexual behavior into question and [aimed to “red tag” or label her as a communist](#) as a type of incitement. Accusations of affiliation to the Communist Party are not to be taken lightly and have very real consequences for neti-



Figure 5. Fake news that Robredo had appointed the Communist Party founder as her adviser went viral. The claims have been refuted by multiple sources.

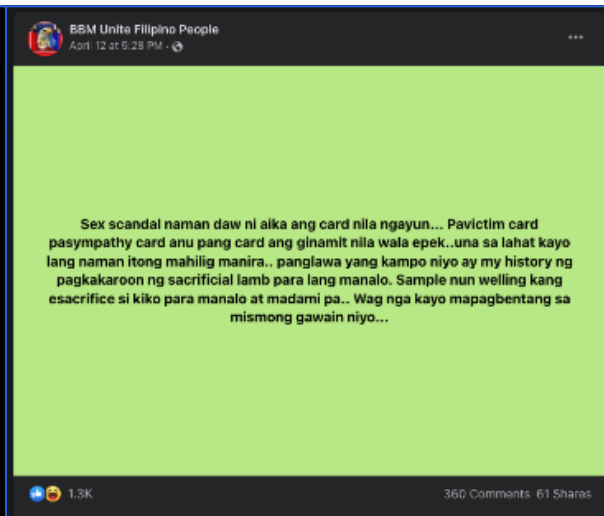


Figure 6. Viral claims circulated that Robredo leaked a fake sex video allegedly showing her daughter to play the “victim card” ahead of the election.

zens both online and on the ground.

Rights groups reported that red tagging has led to unlawful detentions and killings. Human rights organization Karapatan reported to VOA at least 78 people were killed because of red-tagging or anti-terrorism police operations in 2020. There were also some 136 arrests,

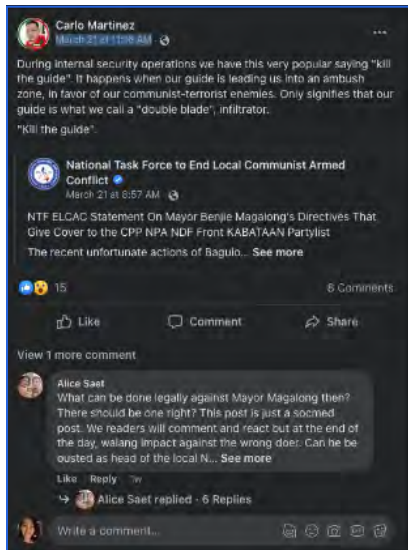


Figure 7. Post calls for the killing of the mayor of Baguio City after being red-tagged by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC).

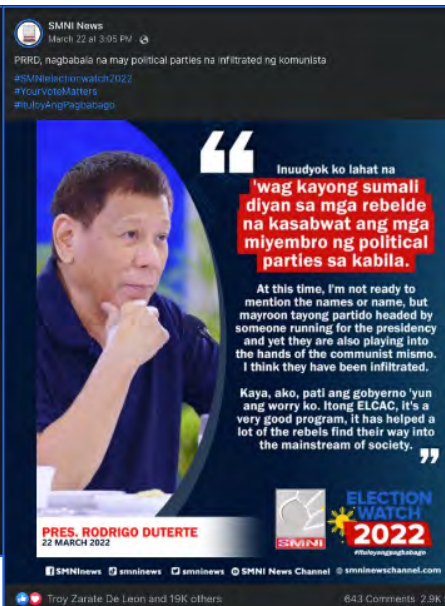


Figure 8. Duterte accuses Robredo’s party of being infiltrated by communists.



Figure 9. Post accuses Robredo of shielding communist members in her party.

according to records compiled by the group. Inevitably such accusations also influenced the outcome of the elections.

Over 10,000 miles away in **Brazil**, far-right, populist leader Jair Bolsonaro employed identical tactics, smearing opponents, and spreading misinformation that cast his critics as “godless communists.” In the run up to Brazil’s October 2022 elections, he was reported to [share false information](#) on WhatsApp to instigate allegations of an anti-Christian plot to elect the Labor Party candidate.

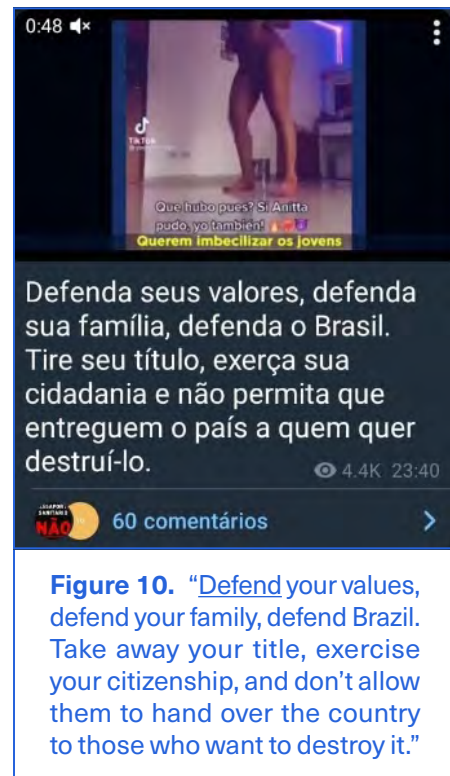
Bolsonaro allies echoed these tactics, calling on even wider audiences on Facebook and Twitter to support Bolsonaro’s campaign to protect “Christian values,” painting his opposition as immoral and debauched.

Former (and now incumbent) leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva announced his intention to run against Bolsonaro in the elections, calling on citizens to unite behind him against Bolsonaro’s “incompetence and authoritarianism.” With 60 percent of voters saying they would not cast their ballot for Bolsonaro, [Lula is on course to win his sixth presidential run since 1989](#). As Trump did in 2019, Bolsonaro has made baseless allegations of electoral fraud, which the former US consul in Rio de Janeiro called [part of a plan to reject any defeat in the October election](#).

Hybrid Regimes (State-sponsored efforts to distort democracy)

Hybrid regimes or “competitive authoritarian” states tend to be politically repressive, while at the same time holding regular elections. Trust in government is generally low, corruption levels high, and media are commonly government-controlled or influenced. [Media literacy levels](#) are similarly ranked as low and in some contexts is exacerbated by lower literacy levels in general.

The period prior to the **Honduran** election was characterized by “unprecedented” levels of political violence and polarization, which played out across social media platforms. The Observatory of Violence [reported](#) six politically motivated homicides of activists and politicians in the week prior to the election. The incidents generated an “avalanche” of hateful comments on social media that grew more hostile as election day approached.



The ruling National Party received the brunt of such comments, with users quick to accuse the party of orchestrating the murders.



Figure 11. An unverified video of a man carrying a machete at a National Party rally.



Figure 12. News of the assassination attempt against Libre mayoral candidate Javier Villalta.



Figure 13. News of a murder of a Liberal Party candidate prompts comments accusing the National Party of the incident.

Accusations of impending violence and reports of weapons stockpiling tended to illicit hate speech between Libre and National Party supporters, with each side claiming the other was responsible. Researchers noted that Hondurans perceived any party found to be guilty of electoral violence as the party most at risk of losing the election. As such, accusations of violence served to discredit a candidate or party's legitimacy.

A major instance of this occurred when the police announced they had uncovered an informal Molotov bomb workshop supposedly intended to be used on election day ten days before the



Figure 14. Video of National Party supporters throwing rocks at a LIBRE party supporter.

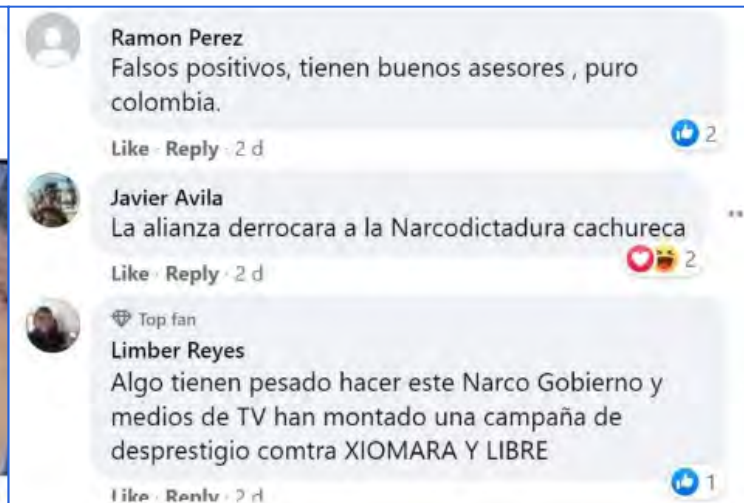


Figure 15. Comments on a news post about the confiscation of Molotov Cocktail explosives.

election was held. Official state media [insinuated](#) that supporters of the Libre Party were to blame for the operation, but researchers noted that user comments on the reports showed Hondurans to be distrustful of state media and accused the National Party of fabricating the reports to stoke fear.

As [the polls](#) began to show Castro's lead, National Party leaders and supporters increased efforts to threaten violence in the event of Asfura's loss. They also made false claims regarding plans by their rival the Libre Party to instigate unrest during the electoral period.



Figure 16. Facebook event calls for looting if Nasry Asfura wins the election.



Figure 17. David Chávez claims the LIBRE party already purchased tires to burn voting centers.

Although the election occurred without major violence or unrest, observers [reported](#) it was marred by untimely disbursement of funds, unclear procedures, lack of regulation, institutional weakness, and a lack of transparency. State media [heavily favored](#) the National Party and openly disobeyed election law by airing segments that promoted National Party achievements. The EU observer mission [described](#) civil servants being pressured to attend National Party rallies and international journalists were denied entry into the country to cover the elections.

However, Internews' researchers noted that Hondurans were markedly active in identifying and publicizing evidence of voter fraud on social media. Much of this was attributed to heightened awareness of National Party strategies after the controversial 2017 Presidential Elections, which had demonstrated the sheer scale of corruption within the party.

Hondurans on social media openly documented different tactics to buy votes. Many examples observed were offers of cash, job contracts, or "bonuses" in exchange for a National Party win.



Figure 18. Article claims that the National Party is using public funds to buy votes.

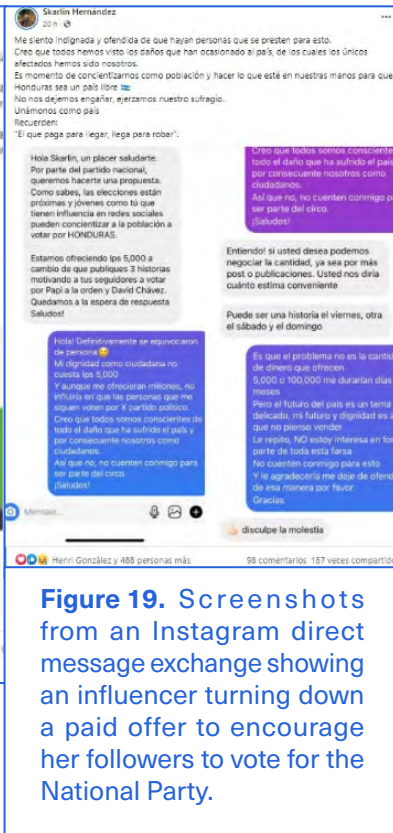


Figure 19. Screenshots from an Instagram direct message exchange showing an influencer turning down a paid offer to encourage her followers to vote for the National Party.



Figure 20. A post disputes a fake report attributed to the EU electoral mission.

[Vote buying](#), ballot filling, and [double voting](#) were also among the violations documented by observer organizations and media throughout election day.

Throughout the electoral period, researchers reported a slew of fake accounts [created by a prominent Mexican PR firm](#). The accounts impersonated well-known media outlets and journalists with the aim of influencing public opinion.

Mexican elections displayed almost identical characteristic and misinformation abundant.

Between September 2020 and July 2021, more than 80 Mexican politicians were murdered, most of them gunned down, [Mexican consulting firm Integralia](#) reported. This represented a 40% increase in violence on the 2018 General Elections. Amid a spiraling security backdrop, more than 60 candidates across Mexico were reported to have withdrawn from the mayoral elections.

One can only wonder whether the amplification of harmful



Figure 21. Fake news that the main opposition leader was wanted for arrest.



Figure 22. A fake account of a high-profile journalist Renato Álvarez calls politicians and civil society leaders' murderers.



Figure 23. A fake account using the Televisa logo incites National Party activists to hold street protests.

speech surrounding the individuals contributed to driving this trend. Although the targeting of Mexican influencers would certainly suggest that online narratives can easily lead to violent action.

Elections across Africa have also been marred by disinformation, violent rhetoric, and harmful content. Although, this was noted to often mirror already existing tribal tensions.

Kenya's 2022 elections were widely reported by international observers as being severely marred by disinformation, sparking fears that poll day would be afflicted with violence as seen in the [2007 elections](#) which killed an estimated 1,300 people.

Scaremongering, a tactic used in Kenya 2017 elections, was similarly employed in the run-up



Figure 24. Candidate for Garissa County Governorship shares [unproven claims](#) of terror operations targeting his campaign trail.

to the 2022 elections. For instance, politician Farah Maalim claimed that improvised explosive devices (IEDs) had been planted along the route of his campaign trail. Maalim's claims were not substantiated or corroborated by Kenya's police force or authorities and he did not provide details of the route. As such, it appears that the message was intended to imply that his opponents were affiliated with Al-Shabaab militias. During Kenya's 2017 elections, reports of planned terror attacks were often used by Al-Shabaab, along with numerous threats of [abducting election officials](#), to discourage participation in the election and voter turnout.

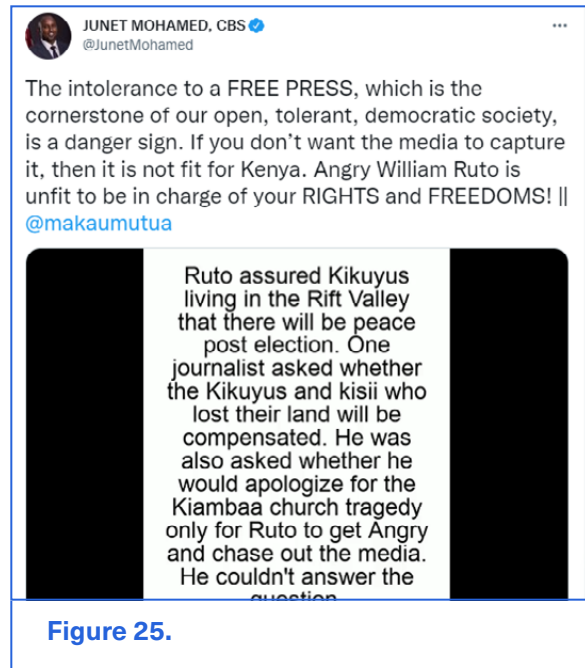


Figure 25.

Tribal tensions were seen to re-emerge against the backdrop of the election. Deputy President William Ruto, during a private event, asked the media to leave. This led to supporters of his opponent Raila Odinga to portray Ruto as discriminating against Kikuyus (who control most Kenyan media outlets) and working against free press.

Seen in [figure 26](#), originally published by TIME magazine and captioned "an arrow maker displays his wares in the Orongai village in Masai Mara, Kenya," claims that it depicts Deputy

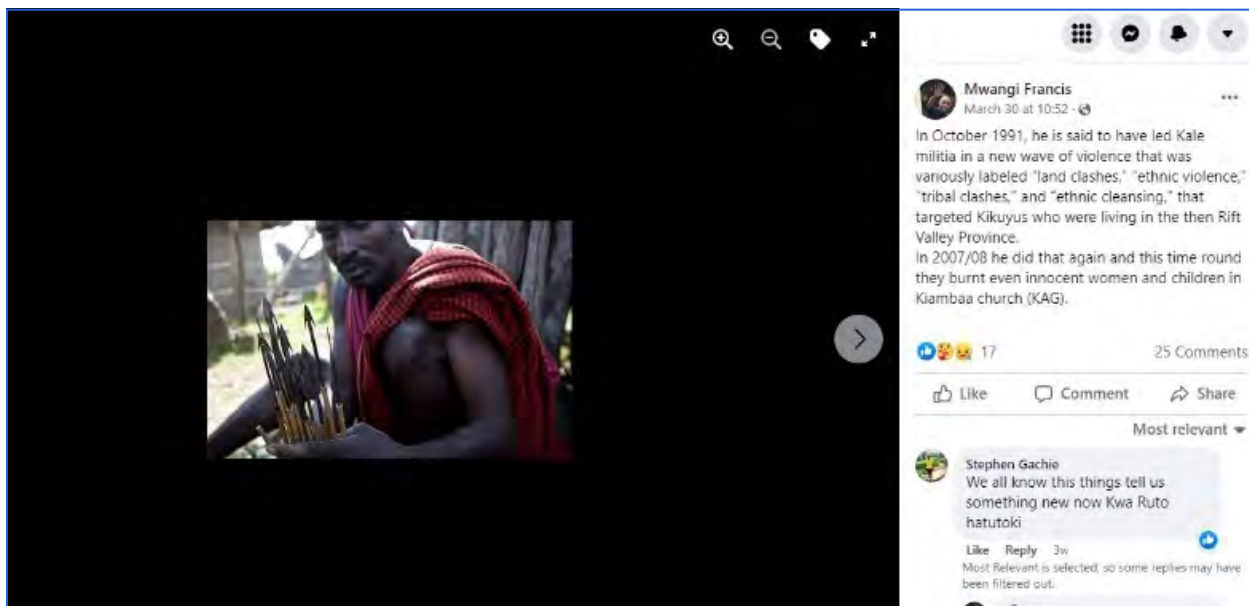
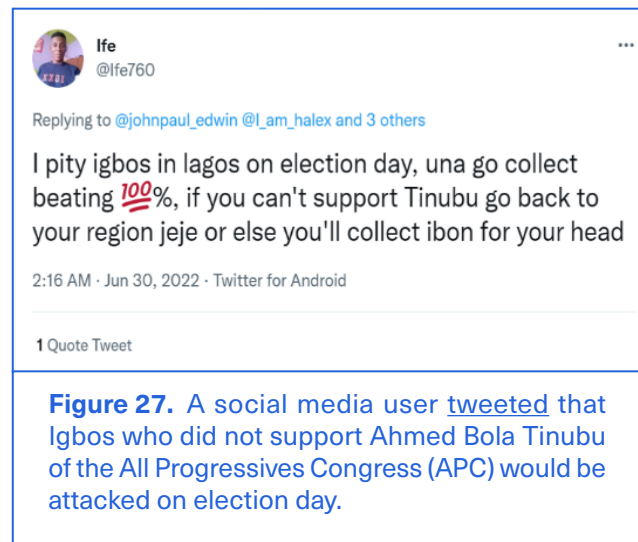


Figure 26. [False reports](#) that Kalenjin tribes are preparing for violent confrontation in the event of a Ruto defeat.

President William Ruto's Kalenjin Tribe preparing for war. The post claims that the pictured man led a militia in 1991 and 2007 elections which resulted in the [torching of a church in Kiambaa](#) in which dozens of people were burnt alive.

Similarly, social media content from **Nigeria** in the run up to the 2023 elections were noted to employ tribal narratives to influence electoral outcomes and incite against Igbo communities living in the capital Lagos.

Such rhetoric which emerged a full seven months ahead of the elections was echoed by high profile figures such as chairman of Lagos parks and garages Musiliu Akinsanya (widely known as MC Oluomo) in the weeks running up to the poll. In [a viral video on social media](#), Akinsanya threatened that Igbo people refusing to vote for the All Progressives Congress (APC) in the Lagos governorship election should stay at home. Akinsanya made the comments while addressing supporters in Lagos. "We have begged them. If they don't want to vote for us, it is not a fight. Tell them, Mama Chukwudi, if you don't want to vote for us, sit down at home. Sit down at home." He later denied that the statement was a threat.



While many of these countries do have laws to regulate the spread of harmful content, the lack of clear legislation and judicial enforcement across countries classified as hybrid regimes means that violence often goes unpunished, which in turn only emboldens online and offline violations.

Authoritarian (Stable vs Unstable Regimes)

Authoritarian states are characterized by unaccountable authority, limited political pluralism, suppressed opposition, and a reliance on emotional appeals for legitimacy. Authorities often present themselves as a "necessary evil" to combat insurgencies or protect certain groups from religious, ethnic, tribal persecution. These states often employ repressive measures against the media, leading to low levels of media literacy and a general suspicion towards media development initiatives.

However, social media behavior within this category of countries exhibits two distinct patterns. In states where the central government has firmly established its power by suppressing unrest and opposition, social media users tend to avoid engaging in electoral discourse, including the spread of harmful content. Disinformation is relatively rare in such contexts due to the fear of facing consequences for its dissemination.

On the other hand, countries classified as authoritarian but experiencing active conflict or civil unrest display similar trends to hybrid regimes. In these cases, harmful speech on social media platforms is aimed at exacerbating existing divisions and fueling conflicts within society. Such regimes undercut the credibility of valid information sources by using coordinated bot campaigns of trolling and distraction, or leaks of hacked materials, meant to swamp the attention of media outlets.

Egypt provides an example how strong authoritarian states can leverage social media to surveill their citizens, amplify propaganda, influence public opinion, and intimidate their opponents but also the wider population. Egypt is a prominent country in the Arab world with a precedent for using social media for positive social change, as evidenced by the [2011 “Facebook Revolution.”](#) However, this brief period of digital liberalization and online activism was soon quashed by the country’s military-backed autocratic regime.

Since taking over in 2013, the administration of President Abdelfattah al-Sisi has cracked down on human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations, political opponents, and critics. To facilitate this crackdown, IT service provider [SEE Egypt](#) was contracted to monitor Egypt’s online communications, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Viber.

Leaked contract tenders referred to a mass monitoring system which would scan social media networks for topics including defamation of religion, calls for demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins, as well as terrorism and incitement to violence. Egyptian authorities reportedly use [Deep Packet Inspection surveillance system](#), which can locate and track users in addition to extensive monitoring of online traffic.

Egyptian authorities state that this type of social media surveillance means to counter terrorism in Egypt and the region. However, the same authorities have said [off-record](#) that they are also on the look-out for “debauchery” or “homosexual acts” to safeguard “values that are important to Egyptians.”

Egypt has a [record for jailing activists](#) that lobby for civil rights online or offline. Charges

levelled include “spreading false news,” “misusing social media” and “joining a terrorist group.” Although it is perhaps the unpredictable and random nature of Egypt’s social media crackdown that is most unnerving.

Users that have fallen foul of the Egyptian authorities include activist [Amal Fathi who criticized the Egyptian government on Facebook Live](#) for failing

to protect women from sexual harassment. A study by UN Women revealed that over 99.3% of Egyptian women had experienced sexual harassment.

In April 2022, an Egyptian Tiktok influencer was sentenced to [three years imprisonment for “human trafficking.”](#) The charges related to a video where she had told followers they could monetize their social media by making live videos. Just two years earlier, several young women were similarly sentenced to two years imprisonment for “inciting debauchery, immorality and stirring up instincts.”

Media outlets have reported that [Egypt hires Instagram influencers](#) to counter negative reports on the country under their new “Media Ambassadors Program.” While it is unclear whether the government is paying the influencers, they have been told that the program will help boost their visibility and increase their followers.

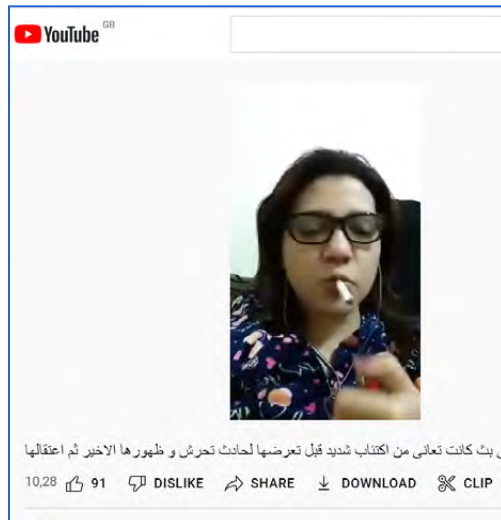


Figure 28. Amal Fathi was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment for criticizing the Egyptian government for not protecting women against harassment.



Figure 29. Manar Samy was jailed three years for “inciting debauchery” on social media.

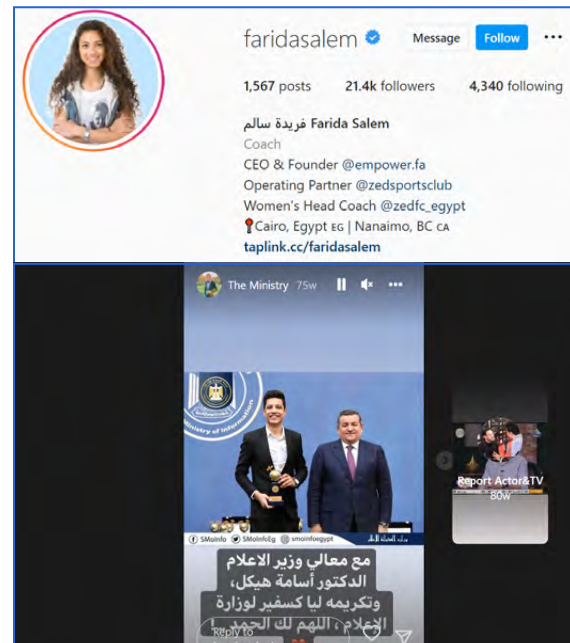


Figure 30. Among 20 influencers selected by the Information Ministry for the Media Ambassador Program were [Farida Salem](#) and [Hussein El-Gohary](#).

Over the last years, [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) have also detected multiple coordinated inauthentic behavior campaigns and removed thousands of fake accounts, originating from Egypt, that sought to redirect genuine online political narratives.

It is not surprising then that ahead of Al-Sisi's 2018 re-election bid Egypt launched an unprecedented crackdown on media, NGOs, and opponents. The aftermath saw many charged on counts of spreading "false news," most prominent of which were the [cases of three journalists and a researcher](#) found guilty of "insulting Egypt's election authority, spreading false news alleging electoral fraud, and using social media to commit crimes."

According to monthly tech-focused magazine WIRED, such examples have made many [reluctant to fully express themselves on social media](#). Egyptian media heavily publicize such stories, leading to death threats. Those targeted say have reported these messages to platforms but as of the report's publication date the networks had taken no action.

Few social media users commented on **Syria's** May 2021 elections, other [than with irony](#). Although there was a noted trend for pro-government misinformation that aimed to bolster the credibility of the elections, with some users claiming that President Bashar al-Assad and the election's legitimacy had been recognized by the United States. Some users also claimed record turnouts, citing numbers that did not add up.



Figure 31. The [post](#) claims that Joe Biden recognised the legitimacy of Assad and the elections.

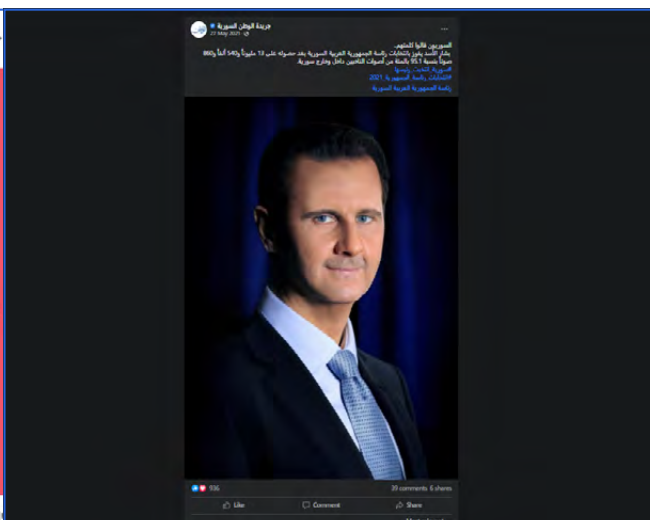


Figure 32. A national newspaper [claims](#) that Assad won 13.5m votes, unlikely given that a large proportion of the population was ineligible to vote due to age (Syria has a high youth population), being located abroad or outside government held areas.

By contrast countries assessed as authoritarian, but experiencing active conflict or civil unrest, were observed to share similar trends with hybrid regimes with online harmful speech geared to fuel existing divisions.

In the case of **Iraq**, sectarian and sexist speech dominated the electoral-related narratives, while online sales of ballot cards to support ethnic, tribal, and sectarian affiliations were a prominent and troubling trend.

Substantial online efforts were exerted in both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to discredit mainstream parties. Internews researchers believe that this had a notable impact on the outcome of the election.

An online election boycott campaign, an offshoot of ongoing anti-government protests, also appeared to have a significant impact on [voter turnout](#).

Another concerning trend that boomed in the run up to the elections was false information about the election process itself. This included fake warnings of gun battles outside polling centers to dissuade voters from going to their local ballot centers- despite expectations the process ran smoothly

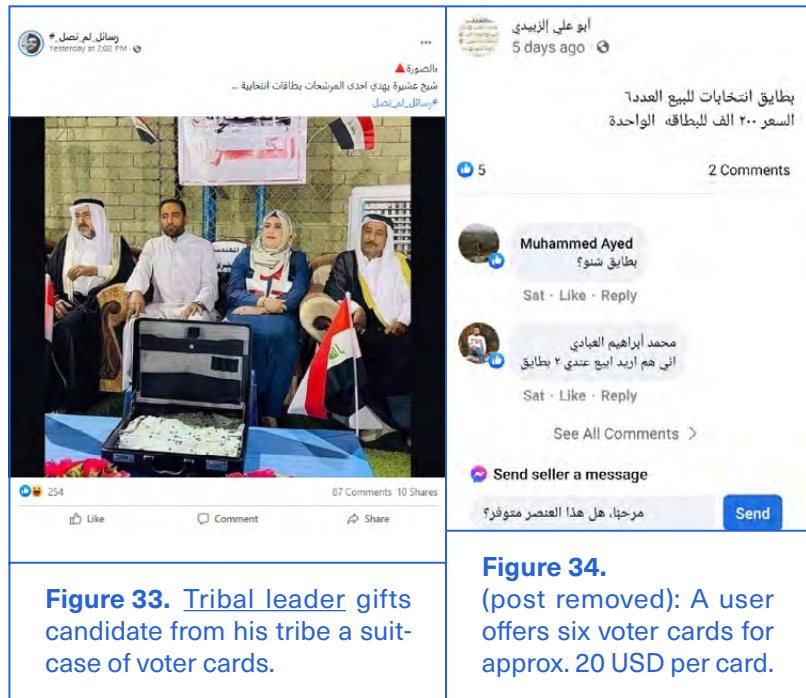


Figure 33. Tribal leader gifts candidate from his tribe a suitcase of voter cards.

Figure 34. (post removed): A user offers six voter cards for approx. 20 USD per card.

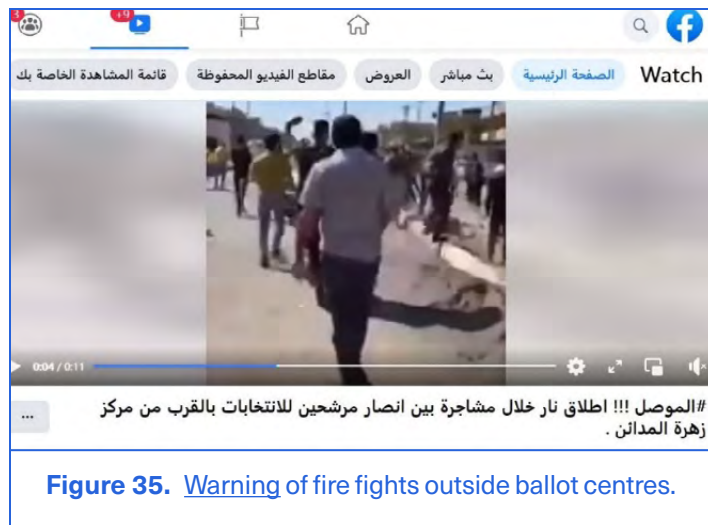


Figure 35. Warning of fire fights outside ballot centres.

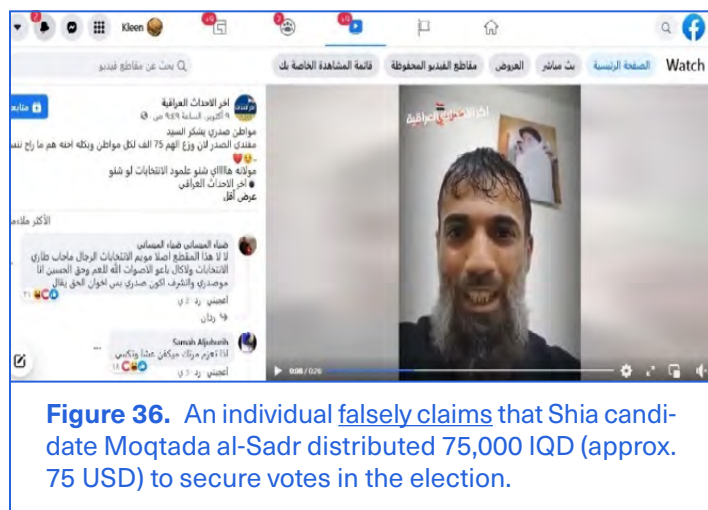


Figure 36. An individual falsely claims that Shia candidate Moqtada al-Sadr distributed 75,000 IQD (approx. 75 USD) to secure votes in the election.

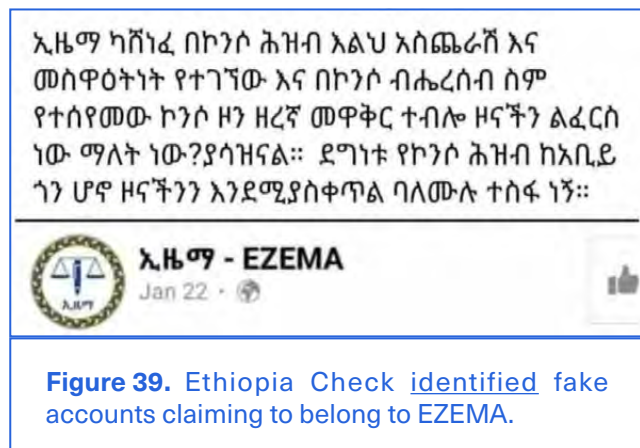
[without any reports of violence.](#)

Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) also intervened in some cases of false information. In one instance, they denied reports circulating on social media of a [disqualification of a candidate in Diyala](#), eastern Iraq.

Ethiopia's June 2021 General Election shared many characteristics with the Iraqi polls, taking place at a time when the concept of a unified Ethiopia was in question. President Abiy Ahmed, the incumbent and winner of the election, had been facing an increasingly distrustful population in a country that long had a fraught relationship with its own system of ethnic federalism.

Throughout the conflict, and during the election, Facebook has been used by Ethiopian government agencies, opposition leaders, and activists to make announcements and mobilize supporters. It has also been employed by militia groups to rally recruits or promote military victories. Despite being a multi-party democracy since 2005, Ethiopia's elections since have been marred with accusations of unfairness. Internews' June 2021 election coverage showed this sentiment not only persisted but was also strongly expressed on social media.

President Abiy drew the greatest ire from the Oromo region's activists and commentators, who [report great disenfranchisement](#)



[and voter apathy](#). Internews’ researchers noted that Facebook was often used to criticize the elections and decry their illegitimacy. Most criticism was directed towards three main actors: President Abiy, the government, and the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE).

Internews’ researchers observed multiple instances of pages impersonating political parties, such as the Assimba Democratic Party which repeatedly requested that an impersonating page be removed. It was eventually taken down by Facebook.

The opposition Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) was also targeted by users creating accounts in the party’s name. Pages appeared on both Facebook and Twitter, which falsely announced the formation of an alliance between the Prosperity Party and EZEMA.

Ethiopia’s conflict unfolded in an already tense political context that pitted Abiy, of Oromo-Amharic background, against the Oromo political elite and powerful youth groups that saw vows of improving Oromo political



Figure 40. [Breaking news](#) — EZEMA Chairman Birhanu Nega has received a heavy beating. The youth of Weldiya got angry and entered the hall to beat him.

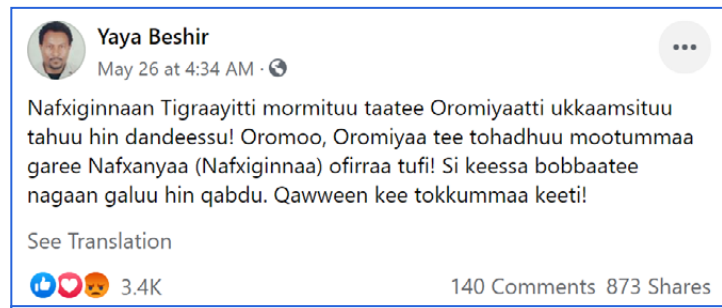


Figure 41. “The [Prosperity Party](#) cannot become an opposition party in the state of Tigray and a dictator in Oromia! Oromos, you should defend Oromia. You should fire the government of the Neftegna team. The people of the government should not return safe. Your gun is what unites you.”



Figure 42. “The [brave](#) are acting against this fake election. The Oromo Liberation Front has completely destroyed the polling station in West Shewa.



Figure 43. “A year ago today, we lost Hache Jawar and heroes like him. So, now we shouldn’t have to listen to fake elections. What the hell? It’s a struggle to struggle.”

representation as nothing but empty promises.

Ahead of (and during) the elections, opposing sides regularly employed social media to incite against rivals. In April, Oromo activists intensified calls for destruction of election outposts, saying that Qeerro, an Oromo nationalist youth group, was [“obliged to burn down polling stations.”](#) The following month, the leader of EZEMA was [assaulted](#) by a group of youths in the Amhara city of Weldiya.

EZEMA continued to [report](#) incidents of harassment against its members in the lead up to the election. Researchers noted significant volumes of content calling for violence in contentious regions, such as Oromia and the Western Shewa Zone.

Some users called online for violence in particularly contentious regions, such as Oromia and the Western Shewa Zone and used doubts about the elections’ credibility as a justification for violence.

A smaller number of posts demonstrated the convergence of the war in Tigray with the election. In one post from February 2021, a Tigray user [called](#) for the death of EZEMA party leader Birhanu Nega, saying “let us kill the killers.”

Ethiopia’s conflict its northern state of Tigray may have killed as many as 600,000 people, making it one of the world’s deadliest conflicts of recent times.

Conclusions

The impact of electoral disinformation and hate speech is a significant and growing concern for democracies around the world. It undermines trust in democratic institutions, distorts public debate, influences voter behavior, harms marginalized groups, and challenges freedom of expression.

Social media can be used to support incumbent politicians within a country or to help third parties disseminate propaganda and disrupt the democratic transfer of power. It is also used by populists who pose a fundamental challenge to neoliberal ideologies, spreading disinformation and stirring outrage that affects voters' judgment and fuels partisanship.

One of the most significant impacts of electoral disinformation observed in this study has been its detrimental impact on peoples' confidence in democratic institutions. When voters believe that their vote may not count, or that the election is rigged, they become disillusioned with the political process, which usually sparks political instability and a weakening of democratic values.

Hate speech and disinformation can shift the conversation away from important issues and towards emotionally charged topics. This can make it more difficult for voters to make informed decisions and can contribute to polarization and offline violence.

Disinformation can also be used to target specific communities, such as by spreading false information about voting locations, hours, or the security of the polling station.

Internews' researchers found that electoral disinformation tends to adopt specific characteristics depending on its different democratic contexts, as well as a range of factors, including political culture, media landscape, and legal and regulatory frameworks. This could be broadly broken down into four different archetypes:

- **Full democracies:** In developed democracies, electoral disinformation may be more subtle and sophisticated. Disinformation may be spread through social media or targeted advertising, with the aim of influencing voter behavior or shifting public opinion. In these contexts, there may be strict legal and regulatory frameworks in place to monitor and limit disinformation. However, the relatively free and open media landscape may also make it more difficult to control the spread of disinformation. Although these democracies tend to invest heavily in countering attempts at electoral interference and provide

excellent examples of how other countries may deal with electoral disinformation.

- **Flawed democracies:** In flawed democracies, electoral disinformation may be more overt and widespread. This can be due to a variety of factors, including weaker legal and regulatory frameworks, less developed (or polarized) media landscapes, and lower levels of political literacy among the population. In these contexts, disinformation may be spread through social media, traditional media outlets, or by political figures themselves. The aim may be to influence voter behavior or to undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions.
- **Hybrid regimes:** In hybrid regimes, which combine elements of democratic and authoritarian rule, disinformation may be used to undermine democratic institutions and maintain power. Disinformation may be spread through a range of channels, also including social media, traditional media outlets, and state-sponsored propaganda. The aim may be to influence public opinion, sow discord, or undermine the credibility of opposition groups.
- **Authoritarian regimes:** In authoritarian regimes, disinformation may be used as a tool to maintain power and suppress dissent. Disinformation may be spread through state-controlled media or by government agents posing as independent actors. In these contexts, there may be little legal or regulatory framework to control the spread of disinformation. The aim may be to create a sense of confusion and uncertainty among the population, making it more difficult for citizens to organize or challenge the regime.

In all these contexts, the impact of electoral disinformation can be significant, undermining trust in democratic institutions, distorting public debate, and challenging fundamental democratic values. To address the challenge of electoral disinformation and harmful speech, a holistic approach is required involving a range of stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations, and tech companies.

Nonetheless, dealing with electoral disinformation and hate speech challenges the fundamental principle of freedom of expression. Yet, while freedom of expression is an important democratic value, it is important to find ways to counter disinformation and hate speech without infringing on this right.

Recommendations

There are several approaches that civil society, non-government organizations, and donors could take to decrease the impacts of online harmful speech overall and to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of opinion based on reliable, pluralistic, and objectively sourced information.

- **Tailored Education and Awareness:** Develop education campaigns that are tailored to the specific disinformation tactics prevalent in different types of democracies. These campaigns should aim to raise public awareness and enhance digital literacy skills, enabling individuals to identify and resist disinformation.
- **Collaborative Research and Policy Advocacy:** Encourage collaboration between stakeholders to conduct research into the sources, spread, and impact of disinformation in different democratic contexts. Use this research to advocate for policies that effectively counter disinformation while upholding freedom of expression.
- **Localized Support and Capacity Building:** Provide targeted support to communities and local organizations based on the specific disinformation challenges they face in their democratic context. This could include providing accurate information, resources, training, and technical support to help them monitor and counter disinformation effectively.
- **Promote Accountability and Resilience:** Encourage social media platforms to take greater responsibility for countering disinformation, with a focus on the specific challenges posed by different democratic contexts. Invest in building societal resilience to disinformation by promoting a diverse and independent media landscape and strengthening democratic institutions.

In conclusion, addressing the challenge of electoral disinformation requires a nuanced and context-specific approach that takes into account the different manifestations of disinformation in various democratic contexts. This involves tailored education and awareness campaigns, collaborative research and policy advocacy, localized support and capacity building, and promoting accountability and resilience. By understanding the specific disinformation tactics prevalent in different types of democracies, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to counter disinformation, protect democratic processes, and build societal resilience. This comprehensive approach is crucial in preserving the integrity of our democratic institutions and ensuring the public's trust in them.



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This report was researched and authored by Internews' Senior Program Officer for Internet Freedom and Resilience, Amira Galal. A multi-sectoral expert in technology, media development, and human rights within conflict-affected contexts, Amira brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to this work. She has offered guidance to a range of stakeholders, including tech platforms, media outlets, NGOs, governments, and universities, on the real-world impacts of online disinformation and harmful speech.

Amira's expertise spans a broad range of areas, including conflict resolution and communication within displaced communities across the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. She has also worked extensively on media development in the Middle East and Africa, social media monitoring of online jihadist activity, digital rights and safety in various regions, and accountability of tech platforms on a multiregional scale.

Amira's unique skill set includes the ability to nurture and build communities, identify cross-disciplinary themes, and devise solutions to complex issues. Her work consistently reflects her commitment to fostering inclusive, safe, and informed digital spaces.



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