



# **POLARISING CONTENT AND HATE SPEECH AHEAD OF KENYA'S 2022 ELECTIONS**

**CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD**

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## Executive Summary

The scourge of Kenyan identity politics exploded with the introduction of multi-party elections in 1992. Since then, political mobilisation of ethnic tensions has led to mass-scale violence.<sup>1</sup> Inter-ethnic clashes during the 2007 general elections alone resulted in over 1,300 deaths, 650,000 displaced people, and more than 117,000 destroyed properties.<sup>2</sup> Similar violence surrounded the elections of 2013, resulting in 430 fatalities,<sup>3</sup> while the 2017 presidential election was marred by serious human rights violations including extra-judicial killings and beatings by police during protests.<sup>4</sup> Also prevalent across these three election periods was gender-based violence and sexist abuse, both against members of the public and against female political candidates.<sup>5</sup>

Election violence does not exist in a vacuum. Offline activity is matched by a plague of online vitriol driving polarisation and violence. The [Institute for Strategic Dialogue's](#) (ISD) analysis of the 2017 general elections, for instance, found a significant amount of tribalism and inter-ethnic hate online and uncovered several social media channels that legitimised violence between ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> With the majority of international interest in Kenya's online environment focusing on Islamist extremist content, however, there is a risk that ethnic or gender-based hate that dehumanises others, legitimises violence and ultimately develops an environment ripe for terrorist exploitation is ignored.

With Kenya's next general elections coming up in 2022, national and local governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) have begun efforts to prevent a repetition of past election violence. To do so, they must operate with an informed and evidence-based understanding of how debate and discussion surrounding elections manifest. With social media, particularly Facebook, becoming the predominant channel through which elections are discussed in Kenya, policies and programmes need to **understand the nature, scope and scale of harmful content online**. Local authorities and civil society groups in particular need a clear picture of the discourses playing out online as they try to prevent an epidemic of election violence and to anticipate community-level flashpoints.

In this context, the [Strong Cities Network](#) (SCN) mapped and analysed hateful content online in Kenya between 15 May 2019 and 15 May 2020. Among others, SCN's research found that discourse surrounding the upcoming elections is already fraught with hate-based narratives and stereotyping along ethnic or tribal lines, while the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inter-religious intolerance. Responses to online hate speech have yet to match the scale and scope of the harmful narratives being presented online, some of which can be found in public fora with millions of subscribers, thus risking the normalisation and mainstreaming of hate. With the elections drawing ever closer, the urgency to deploy new and scale existing prevention initiatives cannot be understated.

This paper serves as a starting point for gaining insight into the narratives being deployed online by presenting key findings from SCN's research into the digital landscape of hate and polarisation in Kenya. This paper also proposes recommendations both tailored to the Kenyan context and informed by international good practice for countering hate online.

## Key Findings

- Over the course of a year, SCN researchers identified **over 85,000 posts that were intolerant towards specific ethnic, religious and political identities**, with 50% of posts found on public Facebook groups that had a collective subscriber rate of over two million. This makes clear the potential for mass public exposure to hateful content to result in a mainstreaming of hate, in turn open the public to exploitation by extremist groups seeking to mobilise violence offline, particularly in the run-up to elections.
- **When discussing political issues online, hate based on ethnic/tribal identity is over 300 times more prevalent than that based on religion, the majority of which targets Kikuyu and Luo groups.** The government's Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), which seeks to address inter-ethnic intolerance among other societal issues in Kenya, is largely regarded as a disingenuous 'box-ticking' exercise rather than a serious political effort to address inter-ethnic grievances. With the next elections drawing closer, it is likely that inter-ethnic hostility will increase and that it may escalate to violence if it remains unaddressed.
- **Harmful narratives pitting religious identities against one another were prevalent and are being exacerbated by COVID-19.** Almost 20,000 posts included intolerant rhetoric related to religion, primarily pitting Islam against Christianity. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya coincided with a gradual increase in inter-religious intolerance online, reflecting SCN research in other contexts that reveals how the pandemic has been exploited by extremist actors to amplify 'us versus them' narratives claiming, for example, that the pandemic is a punishment from God against 'disbelief' and sin.<sup>7</sup>
- In addition to the 85,000+ posts that were identified as religiously, ethnically or politically intolerant, **SCN researchers uncovered more than 15,000 posts containing sexist language.** In some cases, this overlapped with ethnic stereotyping, where women of specific ethnic backgrounds were objectified and dehumanised as sexual commodities. This dual risk of hyper-sexualisation and ethnic stereotyping disproportionately targeted Kikuyu women.
- **Responses to online hate speech in Kenya are progressing but still limited.** Even though the Government of Kenya has legislated against hate speech since it enacted the National Cohesion and Integration Act in 2008, harmful narratives targeting ethnic and religious identities persist at scale. Equally, while Kenya has made some progress with addressing gender-based and sexual violence during elections, incidents not only persist, but relevant departments and agencies within government have also been slow to provide safety, medical services and psychosocial support to victims. There is therefore a critical need to review existing policy and programming to: a) identify and mitigate challenges with applying existing frameworks for response, like the National Cohesion and Integration Act; b) identify and fill gaps in policy and programming, particularly regarding the provision of support for victims of hate on- and offline; and c) scale initiatives that prevent or counter hate in proportion with the severity of the threat online.

## Recommendations

- **The Government of Kenya should develop and invest in educational responses to hate and polarisation in order to be prepared for the 2022 elections.** More than 50% of the hateful content identified by the SCN was found in public Facebook groups with millions of subscribers. There is therefore an urgent need to scale digital resilience and citizenship training, which can mitigate harmful implications of this potential widespread exposure to hateful content online. Existing initiatives like [DigiSchool](#) that provide digital literacy training need to be supplemented with initiatives that teach young people to apply critical thinking online, how to recognise hate and extremism, and how to respond safely and effectively if they are targeted with or witness to hate or extremism online.
- **Civil society and the Government of Kenya should continue to build out research efforts that shed light on the online hate and extremist ecosystem of Kenya.** While this research provides important insight into how harmful content manifests on Facebook in Kenya, there is a wider digital ecosystem around Facebook that needs to be explored and analysed to inform a more holistic understanding of emerging threats online. Given the scale of violence in past elections, this needs to include research focused explicitly on hateful content surrounding election periods, like this research does and like the [Umati Project](#) did in 2013. Beyond election periods, research should focus on the links between large-scale inter-ethnic polarisation and extremism, given both are obstacles to social cohesion and safety in Kenya, and given extremism thrives in contexts that are already heavily polarised.<sup>8</sup> In addition, findings and recommendations from these efforts need to be shared with practitioners and civil society to ensure community-based resilience-building is informed by an understanding of what is happening online.
- **The Government of Kenya and county governments should urgently take steps to mitigate the threat of electoral violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.** Existing resources for the prevention and countering of violent extremism, as well as broader social safety efforts, must consider the potential for hate speech online to escalate to offline violence, be it ethnic-, religious-, or gender-based. This includes, among others, developing and deploying better reporting systems, and rolling out specialised training for law enforcement and other social safety stakeholders on providing trauma-informed support for victims of hate crimes and sexual violence. Governments should also consider partnering with community-based organisations to deliver awareness-raising campaigns that clearly communicate what these types of violence are and how to report it. Concerning sexual violence specifically, in 2019, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Women and Physicians for Human Rights released a telling [report](#) about electoral-related sexual violence in Kenya, which provides a series of recommendations for its prevention, for the protection of victims, and for investigation, prosecution and accountability. The Government of Kenya and county governments should urgently operationalise these recommendations.<sup>9</sup>

- **The Government of Kenya should formally engage and partner with researchers, advocacy groups, activists and human rights professionals on emerging safety threats online.** A multi-disciplinary understanding of and response to online safety threats is essential given that online hate in Kenya is intersectional in nature, present in mainstream fora and therefore has widespread exposure, and has led to violence in the past. Global best practice also underscores the importance of building a multidisciplinary response to the issues of hate, polarisation and extremism.<sup>10</sup>
- **Relevant civil society organisations and other community-based programmes should partner with the private sector to counter the spread of hate speech,** following the example of [Sisi Ni Amani Kenya](#) and [Safaricom](#) in the lead up to the 2013 general elections.<sup>11</sup>

## Introduction

Identity politics have a long history in Kenya, dating back to British colonial rule when policing of the country's tribes and a redistribution of territory along ethnic lines spurred grievances between ethnic groups. Colonial administration also favoured certain ethnic groups over others; by the time Kenya gained its independence in the 1960s, inter-ethnic polarisation was therefore already deeply embedded across the country and in its politics. This inter-ethnic division became even more pronounced when Kenya transitioned from one-party to multi-party politics in 1992, resulting in political coalitions that were formed along ethnic lines. Since then, elections have been plagued by widespread inter-ethnic violence; in the 1990s, ethnic clashes in election periods killed over 3,000,<sup>12</sup> while the presidential elections of 2007-2008 resulted in nearly 1,300 dead, 650,000 displaced and 117,000 properties destroyed.<sup>13</sup> Elections in 2013 and 2017 tell a similar tale, with more than 400 lives taken in the former, and the latter being marred with police brutality and killings.<sup>14</sup>

The exponential increase in social media penetration across Kenya in the past decade means inter-ethnic polarisation now also manifests online. In election periods particularly, political rhetoric that incites and exploits inter-ethnic grievances is amplified in public discourse about political candidates, their voters and how they perform at the polls. In the context of the 2017 elections, for example, research by [the Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD) uncovered vast amounts of tribalism online, including comments like "if our tribe doesn't win, we'd be at war" and "[other tribes] are fine, but Luos are not".<sup>15</sup> Hate speech has also been identified as one of the main catalysts for the election violence in 2007-2008 that killed over 1,000.<sup>16</sup>

Recognising the severity and consequences of hate speech and large-scale ethnic polarisation, Kenya's Parliament enacted the [National Cohesion and Integration Act](#) in 2008, to be enforced by the then-newly created National Cohesion and Integration Committee (NCIC).<sup>17</sup> The Act seeks 'to encourage national cohesion and integration by outlawing discrimination on ethnic grounds,'<sup>18</sup> and defines hate speech as 'the use of threatening, inciting, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or display of any written material with the intention of stirring up ethnic hatred.'<sup>19</sup> While the Act is an important step in addressing inter-ethnic hate, it has been criticised for using a definition of hate speech too broad to act upon.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the NCIC's initial focus on traditional media means it has struggled to curb the rise of hate speech on social media.<sup>21</sup> Online hate speech therefore remains a major challenge for the NCIC going forward, particularly as internet penetration continues to grow across Kenya and as the COVID-19 pandemic sends more people online than ever before.

Against this backdrop, researchers from ISD's [Strong Cities Network](#) (SCN) – the largest global network of local leaders combating hate and extremism - conducted digital analysis to better understand the nature and volume of hateful content online in Kenya. As Kenya gears up to its 2022 general elections, civil society and local governments fear a repetition of past election violence. The country's heated political environment, and the demonstrated potential for hate speech to escalate to large-scale violence, are also compounded by Kenya's ongoing domestic challenge with international terrorist groups like al-Shabaab and local branches of non-violent extremist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Exacerbating these issues is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been exploited to further hateful narratives. Collectively, this makes for an environment that is especially conducive to a violent escalation in hate, polarisation and extremism on- and offline. This research therefore comes at a critical time and seeks to provide insight into the landscape of online hate in Kenya to inform recommendations on response for government and civil society.

## Methodology

To analyse the nature and volume of online hate and polarisation in Kenya, SCN combined natural language processing with expert manual analysis of posts collected between 15 May 2019 and 15 May 2020. SCN researchers focused their analysis on Facebook, given it remains the most popular social media platform in the country.<sup>22</sup> The research questions that underpinned this methodology are:

- What is the scale of hateful content on social media in Kenya?
- What are the key narratives perpetuated in this content?
- How do specific events such as COVID-19 impact extremist speech?

To identify hate and polarisation, researchers used ISD's [definition of extremism](#):

*Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups', and propagates a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their worldview. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike.*

Researchers began by collating keywords **in Swahili and English** that could be used to capture hateful content on Facebook in Kenya. This was informed by SCN's regional experts, past research in Kenya, as well as consultations with SCN's local partners in Isiolo, Lamu, Mombasa and Nakuru counties. The keywords were entered into [CrowdTangle](#), a commercial tool that aggregates data from **public** Facebook pages and groups.

This dataset was then taken to Method52, a natural language processing tool designed by the [Center for the Analysis of Social Media](#) (CASM). CASM and SCN researchers used the tool to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the dataset than would have been possible via CrowdTangle. Firstly, Method52's 'surprising phrase detector' was used to identify keywords in the Facebook dataset that were not accounted for in the initial keyword list compiled by SCN's regional experts. The 'surprising phrase detector' compares a given dataset (in this case from Facebook) with a reference corpus of text in the same language to identify any words or phrases that occurred more frequently in the dataset than in the reference corpus. Upon completion of this process and a manual review of all keywords, a final list of **371 keywords** was taken forward for data collection. SCN collected **1,066,832 public Facebook posts** that contained one or more of the identified keywords between 15 May 2019 and 15 May 2020.

Method52 was then used to classify this dataset by separating keywords into four analytical themes to categorise the collected posts accordingly. This included:

- 1) content targeting religious identity,
- 2) content targeting ethnic identity,
- 3) politically intolerant content,
- 4) and hateful content related to COVID-19.

The dataset of 1,066,832 was filtered through each keyword list. Categorised data was filtered further using a relevancy/irrelevancy classifier that was manually trained by SCN's regional experts. Irrelevant content (posts not determined as hateful or extremist based on application of ISD's definition of extremism above) were removed from the dataset. A total of 87,950 unique posts were classified as extremist or hateful and therefore relevant. A subset of posts per category was then manually analysed to draw out key narratives.

Analytical theme <sup>2</sup>	Sample Keywords	No. of posts	% of total (87,950)
Content targeting religious identity	Kuffar, Infidels, "hate Muslims"	19,179	22%
Content targeting ethnic identity	"stupid kalenjins", "kikuyu thieves"	8,529	10%
Politically intolerant content	#despotsmustgo, "evict kikuyus"	56,744	65%
Hateful content related to COVID-19	Chinesevirus, kungflu	6,619	8%

<sup>2</sup>Over 3,000 posts fit into two or more categories. The sum total number of posts per analytical theme is therefore higher than the total number of unique posts.

## Analysis - divisive narratives in the run-up to the 2022 elections

Given the scale of politically marginalising content and the general, heated nature of Kenyan politics, SCN researchers focused their analysis of this data on the 33,750 unique posts identified as either a) politically and ethnically or religiously intolerant, b) ethnically or religiously intolerant without explicit reference to a political party or candidate, or c) espousing hate-based narratives related to COVID-19.

SCN's analysis shows that, similar to previous elections, hateful discourse in the run-up to the 2022 elections is shaped by 'us-versus-them' narratives that legitimise violence and hostility towards ethnic 'others' (or 'out-groups'), as a means for the prosperity and survival by an 'in-group'. SCN's research found, for example, that political content was over 300 times more likely to include intolerance against ethnic identities than religious identities. On the other hand, posts related to COVID-19 were more likely to contain religious intolerance than ethnic intolerance. Overall, ethnic and religious identities continue to be co-opted to sow division and hate.

### Scale and potential reach of hateful content

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The 33,750 posts taken forward for analysis were found on 63 different Facebook pages and groups with a **combined subscriber amount of over eight million**. Accounts ranged from public groups to official pages of groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir. However, 50% of posts were found in just three of these 63 sources, all of which were public discussion groups. Content in these three groups is largely peaceful political chatter or more general discussion, dotted with the hateful posts that this research identified. This reveals a potential mainstreaming of hateful narratives, where hate is a) posted in large public groups and b) not removed by the group's administrators, thus risking widespread and regular exposure to hateful content. These three groups had a collective subscriber amount of over two million at the time of data collection, speaking to the potential reach of the hateful posts therein.

### Tribalism and inter-ethnic hate speech

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SCN's research found that discourse surrounding the 2022 elections is already rife with scapegoating and stereotyping along ethnic lines; politicians, for example, are frequently subject to hate based on ethnicity, while different ethnic groups are stigmatised based on the activities of affiliated politicians. In the SCN's dataset, this is particularly prevalent in discourse surrounding the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), a political agreement between opposition leader, Raila Odinga (of Luo ethnicity) and President Uhuru Kenyatta (of Kikuyu ethnicity). Signed in March 2018, the BBI is a consultative process that seeks to bring political stability to the country through a nine-point agenda that includes addressing 'ethnic antagonism and competition' and 'divisive elections'.<sup>23</sup>

SCN's investigation of online posts shows that political divisions continue to thrive despite the March 2018 'handshake' between President Kenyatta and Odinga. In particular, opponents to the BBI process engage in a vociferous **Kikuyu versus Luo debate**, where both ethnic groups are treated as homogeneous 'others' and stereotyped based on the political activities and careers of Kenyatta and Odinga, respectively. For example, anti-Kikuyu content revolves primarily around the perceived benefits Kikuyus gain from Kenya's history of successive Kikuyu presidents; Kikuyus are stereotyped as being favoured by Kenya's political system at the expense of others. "Kikuyus are thieves" (or

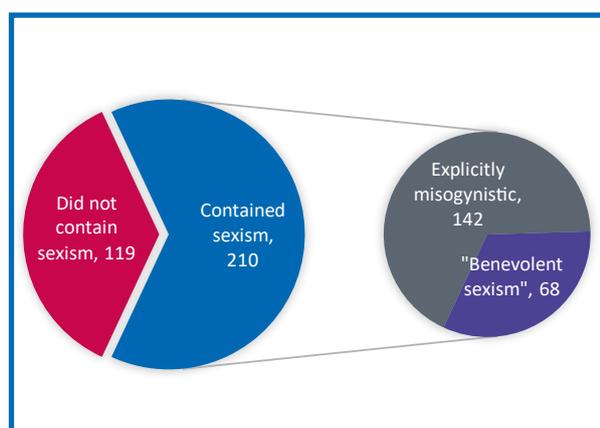
“kikuyu ni wezi”) and “okuyu” (a derogatory Luo corruption of Kikuyu) are prevalent in discourse related to President Kenyatta, for example. This is exacerbated by rhetoric put out by opposing politicians, who rally supporters by claiming their presidency will bring prosperity to communities with whom they share ethnicity. This is reminiscent of the rhetoric that fuelled past election violence, where politics are posited as a competition between ethnic groups rather than political stances.

Similarly, content targeting Odinga often incorporates anti-Luo sentiment, where Luos are stigmatised as “fools” and as violent supporters of Odinga. For example, common in the inter-ethnic hate dataset were derogatory references to Luos as “stone throwers”, likely alluding to Kikuyu-Luo violence in 2007-2008,<sup>24</sup> and accusations of Luos being “brainwashed” or “brainless”. Also prevalent were claims that Luos (rather than Odinga individually) will never be president, again framing political aspirations in ethnic terms and homogenising ethnic identities. Narratives similarly persist in which Odinga is accused of being a “witch doctor” (or “mganga”), a highly inflammatory label in a country with significant religious adherence.<sup>25</sup>

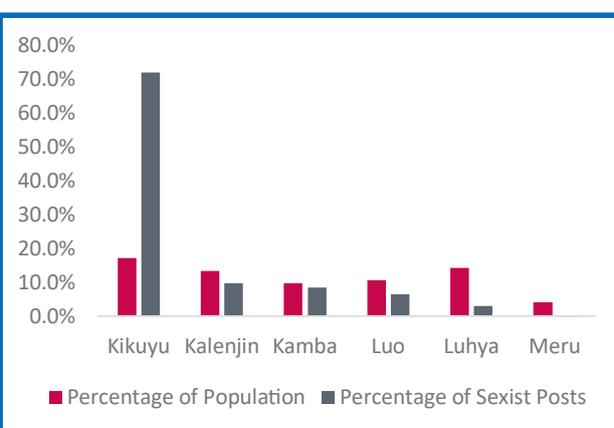
Tying into the Kikuyu vs. Luo debate is content that targets Deputy President William Ruto and, by extension, the Kalenjin ethnic group. Ruto’s supporters are derogatorily referred to as “tangatanga” (or “loitering”), in a nod to allegations that official business trips he took in the past were actually political campaigns to strengthen his bid for presidency. Kalenjins are often grouped into this derogatory labelling, where Kalenjins are accused of being “tangatanga idiots” or “tangatanga toddlers”.

## The intersection with sexism

While manually coding a subset of content categorised as inter-ethnic hate, SCN researchers uncovered significant sexist rhetoric. To better understand the scale, SCN researchers quantified this by coding 329 random, unique posts classified as inter-ethnic hate. Researchers found that 210 posts (64%) contained both inter-ethnic hate and sexist language, of which 142 posts were explicitly misogynistic. The remaining 68 could be categorised as subtler, ‘benevolent sexism’, or seemingly positive comments that reflect ‘attitudes that [...] are often dangerous and damaging to women’s rights and even their safety’.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 1:** Sexist language was found in 210 out of 329 posts selected randomly from the subset of posts classified as inter-ethnic hate.



**Figure 2:** Percentage of population vs. percentage of sexist posts targeted by ethnic group.

Of the 210 sexist and ethnically intolerant posts, the majority targeted Kikuyu women, followed by Kalenjin and Kamba women. Although Kikuyus are the largest ethnic group in Kenya, they make up less than 20% of the total population, whereas over 70% (150) of the 210 posts were targeted at Kikuyu women. Sexist content therefore disproportionately targets the Kikuyu ethnic group, which may relate to widely held grievances against Kikuyus, who are accused of benefiting from Kenya's political landscape through the country's successive Kikuyu presidencies.

Narrative analysis of these 210 posts suggests most of this sexist content takes the shape of objectification, specifically of physical features that are associated with the different ethnic groups. This is followed by content that stigmatises ethnic groups by their alleged sexual performance, creating an environment where women of specific ethnic backgrounds are hyper-sexualised and demeaned as sexual commodities.

## Sexism in Kenya more broadly

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After uncovering sexist content in the subset of posts categorised as inter-ethnic hate, SCN researchers filtered the initial dataset of 1,066,332 posts through a list of sexist keywords to better understand the scale of sexism on Facebook in Kenya. Posts identified as containing one or more of these keywords were then filtered through a relevancy classifier, which categorised **15,714 posts as containing sexist language**. Further automated classification of these posts reveals a significant overlap between sexism and religious intolerance, and sexism and ethnic intolerance, suggesting women are especially targeted to amplify stereotypes and polarising narratives about ethnic and/or religious identity.

This is alarming, given the double dehumanisation of gender and ethnicity or religion is known to lead to violence. In the UN's 2019 [report](#) on conflict-related sexual violence, the Secretary General notes, for example, that sexual violence has been 'used to displace communities, expel so-called 'undesirable' groups and to seize contested land and other resources.'<sup>27</sup> In Kenya, electoral-related sexual violence is a known phenomenon, as highlighted in a 2019 joint [report](#) by the [UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), [UN Women](#) and [Physicians for Human Rights](#) (PHR).<sup>28</sup> Following the 2007 and 2017 elections, electoral-related sexual violence was 'committed by non-state and state actors, and has targeted political aspirants, their supporters and families, and other civilians, particularly targeting 'select' communities owing to their geographical or physical locality and their ethnic origins, which are then directly linked to their perceived political leanings'.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Kenya's [National Commission on Human Rights](#) documented 201 cases of sexual violence in 11 counties in 2017. Given there are 47 counties in Kenya,<sup>30</sup> the nationwide number of cases is likely much higher.

Further, after Kenya's 2010 Constitution introduced a gender quota, where 'no more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies shall be of the same gender', women were afforded more opportunity to join Parliament and other governance structures.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, backlash against this gender quota has placed female politicians at risk of targeted sexual violence. When the quota was enforced during the 2013 elections, Kenya faced an exponential rise in sexual- and gender-based violence against female politicians, for example.<sup>32</sup> Among others, female politicians reported receiving threatening and hostile verbal abuse from male counterparts, while some were subject to beatings and attempted rape.<sup>33</sup> The threats faced by female politicians in Kenya are exacerbated by insufficient police and legal response and protections; despite newly formed

coalitions and networks to address gender-based and sexual violence, the Kenyan government has been slow to provide safety, medical services and psychosocial support to victims, and have failed to prioritise prosecution of perpetrators.<sup>34</sup> While the sexist content SCN identified was more generic in scope - it targeted Kenyan women more broadly rather than specific female politicians - the scale of this content is worrisome when this wider context and history of gender-based violence is considered.

## COVID-19: racism and inter-religious scapegoating

Finally, researchers found there was a rise in intolerant religious discourse that coincided with the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup> and the arrival of the virus in Kenya.<sup>35</sup> Similar to the SCN's findings in other contexts, COVID-19 has been exploited in Kenya to stigmatise religious 'others', where the pandemic is viewed as a punishment against 'non-believers'. For example, SCN researchers found claims that the absence of an 'Islamic state' or *Caliphate* is to blame for the pandemic, and that, in turn, implementation of extremist understandings of Islamic governance is the only solution to the pandemic and other contemporary crises. Also present were claims that the virus is a lesson for Muslim women that don't wear the headscarf or Niqab, again adding a gendered element to polarising narratives online.

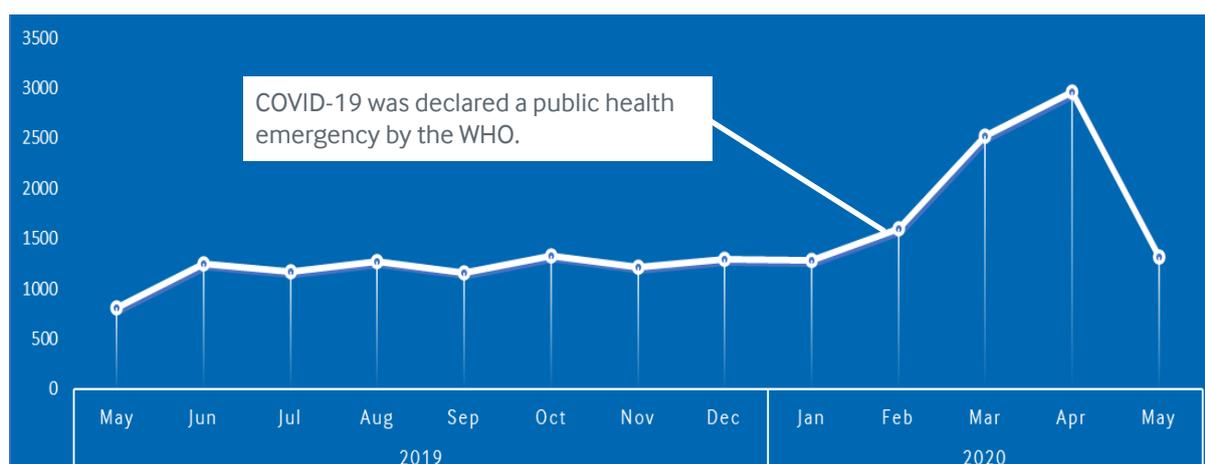


Figure 3: Volume of Intolerant Religious Discourse Over Time

Reflective of global increases in anti-Asian hate, SCN researchers also uncovered instances of anti-Chinese rhetoric, where the pandemic is referred to as a punishment against China (e.g. for human rights violations against predominantly Muslim Uighurs in Northern China) and where social media users advocate for the deportation of Chinese people in Kenya.

Importantly, COVID-19-related content was by far the least prominent of the four analytical themes in our dataset. This is telling, especially given the data collection period coincided with the spread of COVID-19 globally and that it overlaps with when the virus was labelled a global health emergency and pandemic by the World Health Organisation. This surprising lack in COVID-19 related content may derive from a) the fact that Kenya is gearing up to its elections and that therefore online discussion is concentrated on politics; b) that there is greater moderation of pandemic-related content; or c) that COVID-19 related discussion takes place primarily in private forums.

<sup>2</sup> In response to increasing COVID-related deaths and infection rates globally, the [World Health Organisation](#) issued a public health emergency on 31 January 2020. COVID-19 was declared a <pandemic> on 11 March 2020.

## Conclusion

The mixed-methods approach of this research has helped shed light on the scale and nature of hateful content online in Kenya. The SCN's research highlights that, just like in past elections, political debate surrounding the 2022 elections is rife with scapegoating and stereotyping along ethnic lines, particularly between Kikuyus and Luos. Other ethnic groups are not immune however, with anti-Kalenjin content also present and tying in closely with narratives criticising or attacking Ruto. Meanwhile, COVID-19 is exploited to further dehumanise 'others', including specific religious communities and Chinese people.

Compounding inter-ethnic hate and religious intolerance are gendered narratives that demean and dehumanise women by objectifying and hyper-sexualising them. Alongside the scale of anti-women harassment in past elections and the gendered tactics used to intimidate women who are perceived as threats against male hegemony, this reveals the extent and persistence of sexism in Kenya on- and offline. Despite numerous acts, policies and plights by international bodies like the UN and the African Union, the Kenyan government has yet to meaningfully address, politically and practically, the gender-based and sexual violence that takes place before, during and after election periods in the country.

Together, this creates an environment conducive to radicalisation and, perhaps more pointedly, signals a mainstreaming or normalising of hateful narratives. As Kenya draws closer to the 2022 elections, hateful and sexist content online may only increase, meaning a holistic, 'whole-of-society' response to these emerging online threats is critical to mitigate against a repetition of electoral violence. County Governments and community-based stakeholders are crucial to this effort, as their daily interface with local communities affords them unique insights not only into the threat landscape on- and offline, but also into the services that can be leveraged to respond. Findings and recommendations from this research can form a critical component of this response, by helping to inform evidence-based programming against the most prevalent forms of hate in Kenya.

This research is, however, just the beginning. Further research must be conducted to understand the wider ecosystem of online hate in Kenya, beyond Facebook and other mainstream social media platforms. As the general elections draw closer, and as COVID-19 continues to send people online, efforts to understand the threat and respond proportionately must be scaled urgently to prevent the severe and fatal violence witnessed in every Kenyan election since the 1990s.

## Endnotes

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