Chapter 18

Political Use of Internet During the Benin 2011 Presidential Campaign: Fad Effect or Mid-Term Strategy?

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ABSTRACT

During the Benin presidential election of March 2011, a new communication tool (Internet) was added to the traditional tools of electoral campaign: meetings, electoral promotion gimmicks, political songs, broadcast and print media, and posters. Indeed, the three main candidates to the presidential elections integrated Internet in their comprehensive strategy, recruiting staff to take care of a Website, several user profiles on famous social networks. Meanwhile, the Internet is used by only 2.2% of the population. This chapter analyzes the Websites of the three candidates, paying particular attention to graphic design, uploaded available information, frequency of updating, and interaction with the audience. It also scrutinizes the use of various profiles on social networks. The chapter then interrogates why there was such an important investment on the Internet during this campaign, whereas data show that very few potential voters are actually connected to the Internet in Benin. This chapter identifies the role of Internet campaigning and the place that the Internet has taken in the electoral communication strategies, and tries to understand the real purpose behind this use.

INTRODUCTION

The Benin 2011 presidential election campaign was marked by an evolution as regards tools and communication practices. Indeed, the Internet became a major tool integrated into each candidate’s strategy. With the advent of this new tool—which completes the traditional tool-kit used, especially the media—candidates had a strong online presence. We can say that for the first time, the Internet was incorporated into political communication for an election in Benin. But how important was
this new tool in the electoral apparatus during the 2011 presidential campaign in Benin? Was it just a fad or did candidates’ staff try to build a real coherent and consistent strategy? Which public was targeted?

This chapter intends to answer these questions by providing contextual elements which can aid understanding the importance of the 2011 presidential election on the one hand and the sociological and technical situation of the Internet and its users in Benin on the other hand. Then the tools used are outlined and described before analyzing how Internet strategies were built.

2011 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: THE KEY ISSUES AT STAKE

Since “La mue politique” (Frère, 1998) that occurred in Benin through the holding of the National Conference of Vital Forces of the Nation, there have been several presidential elections in the country. Thus, the one held in 2011 was the fifth one. The first four elections showed “l’habitation électorale” (Banégas, 2003) of Benin and bore out “the fact that the country was a kind of exception among West African countries” (Mayrargue, 2006, p. 157). But in 2011, to everyone’s surprise, Benin coped with one of the most critical crisis the country had ever experienced under the Democratic Renewal era. The voting was held under difficult conditions. Indeed, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in charge of organizing the voting, had not been set in time and the voters’ list established was strongly disputed. Moreover, the voting was postponed twice and the country faced political tensions like never before. The INEC received fourteen candidacies. But 13 candidates finally competed because Antoine Dayori, second Vice-President of the outgoing National Assembly, decided to withdraw, three days before the voting day, to support candidate Abdoulaye Bio Tchané.

Due to their political experience, their stature, or even their reputation, three candidates (Yayi Boni—outgoing President; Adrien Houngbédji—single candidate, representative of the traditional opposition; and Abdoulaye Bio Tchané—President of the West African Development Bank until he resigned to run for presidency) among the thirteen were seen as the main challengers by observers.

Four major facts characterized the pre-electoral period: the introduction of a computerized permanent voters’ list for the first time in Benin electoral process; Yayi Boni’s strong determination to stay in power; the mobilization and the gathering, for the first time, of the opposition forces around a unique candidacy; and the arrival of an outsider, Abdoulaye Bio Tchané, who reminded Candidate Yayi Boni of 2006 in many ways.

Since voters’ lists were traditionally established manually, the advent of the computerized permanent voters’ list really broke with habits. The setting up of this new list was a consensual decision motivated by the high number of fraud cases registered during previous elections. However this new tool had been politicized from the beginning of the process so much so that it incurred many people’s wrath. This made it difficult to carry out. The opposition denounced that more than a million voters who favored them had not been counted by the census. Many associations from the “civil society” merged in the collective “Fors Elections,” headed by Mr. Joseph Djogbénou. They also deplored several irregularities which harmed the computerized permanent voters’ list; they then requested the postponement of the elections. The vote was initially supposed to take place on February 27th, before being postponed twice: first to March 6, and then to March 13, which was finally the election day.

The second issue was the potential second term of the outgoing President, Yayi Boni. The candidate, for his own succession, offered his people “d’aller plus loin ensemble,” meaning to go beyond what he had done during his five-year term. After “the Change,” he was praised during his 2006
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