

# OPERATION CARTHAGE

How a Tunisian company conducted  
influence operations in African presidential elections



June 5, 2020

## **Credits**

### **For the Digital Forensic Research Lab**

*Principal researcher and author*

Andy Carvin, Senior Fellow

*Editorial support*

Luiza Bandeira, Research Associate

Graham Brookie, Director and Managing Editor

Iain Robertson, Deputy Managing Editor

*Research support*

Nika Aleksejeva, Research Associate, Baltics

Alyssa Kann, Research Assistant

Kanishk Karan, Research Associate

Ayushman Kaul, Research Assistant, South Asia

Tessa Knight, Research Assistant, Southern Africa

Jean le Roux, Research Associate, Southern Africa

Roman Osadchuk, Research Assistant

Esteban Ponce de Leon, Research Assistant, Latin America

*Cover design*

Kanishk Karan, Research Associate

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[dfrlab@atlanticcouncil.org](mailto:dfrlab@atlanticcouncil.org)

## Executive Summary

A Tunisia-based company operated a sophisticated digital campaign involving multiple social media platforms and websites in an attempt to influence the country's 2019 presidential election, as well as other recent elections in Africa. In an exclusive investigation that began in September 2019, the DFRLab uncovered dozens of online assets with connections to Tunisian digital communications firm UReputation. On June 5, 2020, after conducting its own investigation, Facebook [announced](#) it had taken down more than 900 assets affiliated with the UReputation operation, including 182 user accounts, 446 pages, and 96 groups, as well as 209 Instagram accounts. The operation also involved the publication of multiple Francophone websites, some going back more than five years.

In a statement, a Facebook spokesperson said these assets were removed for violating the company's policy against foreign interference, which is [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) on behalf of a foreign entity. "The individuals behind this activity used fake accounts to masquerade as locals in countries they targeted, post and like their own content, drive people to off-platform sites, and manage groups and pages posing as independent news entities," the spokesperson said. "Some of these pages engaged in abusive audience building tactics changing their focus from non-political to political themes, including substantial name and admin changes over time."

"Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination," Facebook added, "our investigation found links to a Tunisia-based PR firm, UReputation."

The influence operation, which for research purposes the DFRLab has given the designation Operation Carthage in reference to the ancient empire located in what is now modern-day Tunisia, was based around a collection of inauthentic Facebook pages targeting people in 10 African countries. According to open source evidence and a review of assets subsequently provided by Facebook, the operation exerted its influence in multiple African presidential campaigns, including supporting Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé's February 2020 reelection campaign, as well as former Ivorian President Henri Konan Bédié's campaign for the upcoming October 2020 election in Côte d'Ivoire. Approximately 3.8 million Facebook accounts followed one or more of these pages, with nearly 132,000 joining operation-administrated groups and over 171,000 following its Instagram accounts.

The DFRLab has previously reported on instances in which digital communications companies profit by engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook and other platforms. In May 2019, Facebook [removed more than 250 assets](#) created by Archimedes Group, an Israeli-based digital influence company that had established inauthentic pages in at least 13 countries, including Tunisia. A similar takedown took place in August 2019, when it [removed online assets](#) connected to public relations companies in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

These examples, as well as others ranging from Russia to the Philippines, demonstrate how otherwise legitimate digital communications companies and PR firms have taken up disinformation campaigns and online influence operations involving coordinated inauthentic behavior as part of their suite of services. While it remains unknown how many digital communications firms now engage in disinformation for profit – what has been referred to as “[disinformation as a service](#)” – investigations such as this one are discovering their involvement in influence operations with increasing frequency.

While companies engaging in disinformation for profit potentially expose themselves to enormous reputational risk, the potential revenues that can be made through running covert campaigns and influence operations are apparently enough to sway at least some digital communications companies toward the practice. Additionally, the ease at which a company can establish new brand identities through the incorporation of shell companies lessens these risks; if a company is caught and banned by a social media platform, there is nothing to stop it from setting up shop under a new name and in a new country to continue their business.

In this particular instance, the influence network cut across a large swath of countries and topics, notably elections. It appears to have been financially motivated, as there was no ideological consistency across the content. Much of the material was not outright false, but the pattern of behavior and the myriad connections across the network show a widespread intent to mislead – most specifically about the motives and connections of the network itself. According to Facebook, the operation invested the equivalent of around \$331,000 in the form of Facebook ads, primarily paid in euros and U.S. dollars.

While much of the network engaged on political topics, candidates, and elections, this case is primarily about inauthentic influence operations for profit, and the temptations faced by otherwise legitimate communications firms to engage in it. The actors operating this particular network did not draw a distinction between a strategic communications firm, whose interests lie in serving the needs of a client, and journalism, where transparency, accountability, and facts are paramount. By not drawing that distinction, innumerate voters across multiple countries in Africa might have made their electoral decisions based in part on misleading information from inauthentic sources, potentially influencing the course of elections.

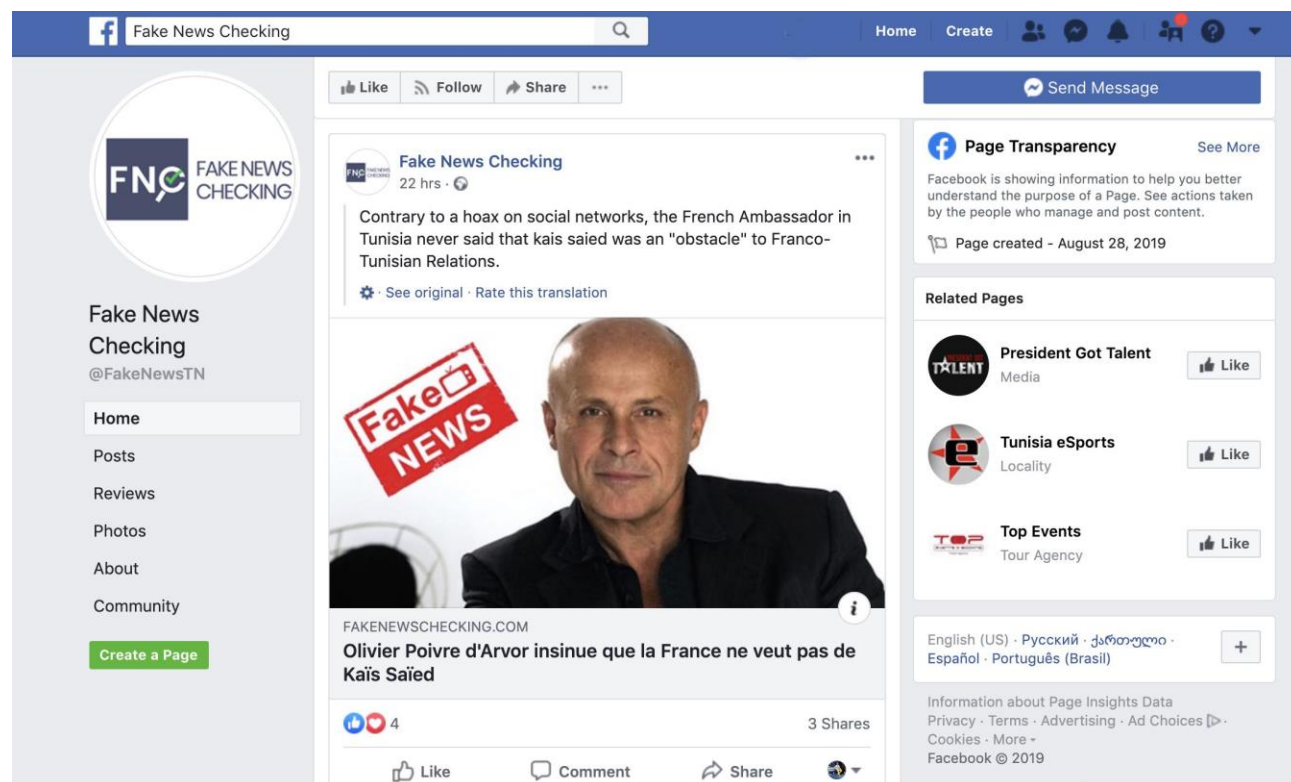
## Initial suspicions raised by Tunisian “fake news checking” campaigns

During the [May 2019 takedown](#) of pages affiliated with the Archimedes Group, the DFRLab began investigating online influence efforts related to Tunisian politics. One particular page associated with the Archimedes campaign was noteworthy. “Stop à la désinformation et aux mensonges” (“Stop disinformation and lies”) was a well-organized Facebook page that had adopted the persona of a fact-checking organization monitoring Tunisian media. As the DFRLab [reported](#) at the time, “Ironically, it focused on calling out what it claimed to be disinformation in Tunisian media, demanding that Tunisians become more vigilant, despite it being an inauthentic disinformation campaign in its own right.”



*“Stop à la désinformation et aux mensonges” Facebook pages attributed to the Archimedes Group.  
(Source: Facebook/[DFRLab](#))*

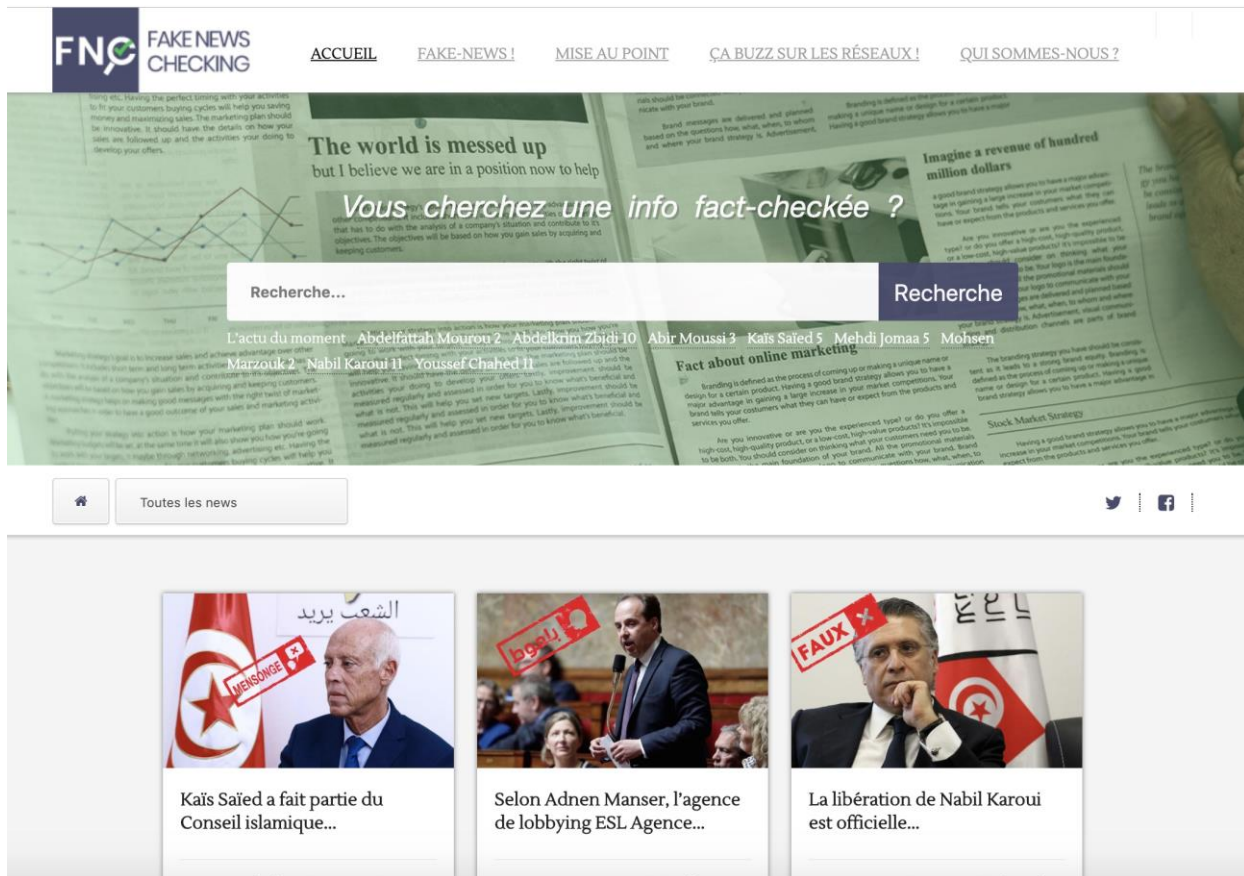
Several months after the Archimedes Group takedown, the DFRLab discovered another Tunisian Facebook page with potential parallels to “Stop à la désinformation et aux mensonges.” The new page, “Fake News Checking,” launched on August 29, 2019, and presented itself as an independent fact-checking effort.



*“Fake News Checking” Facebook page. (Source: Facebook)*

“Fake News Checking” appeared to be a sincere attempt to monitor disinformation related to Tunisia’s 2019 presidential elections. Unlike the Archimedes Tunisian “fact-checking” page, however, “Fake News Checking” had an identifiable person behind it. In September 2019, [BBC Arabic](#) interviewed one of the page’s co-founders, a Tunisian journalist named Moëz Bhar.





Fake News Checking website. (Source: [fakenewschecking.com](http://fakenewschecking.com))

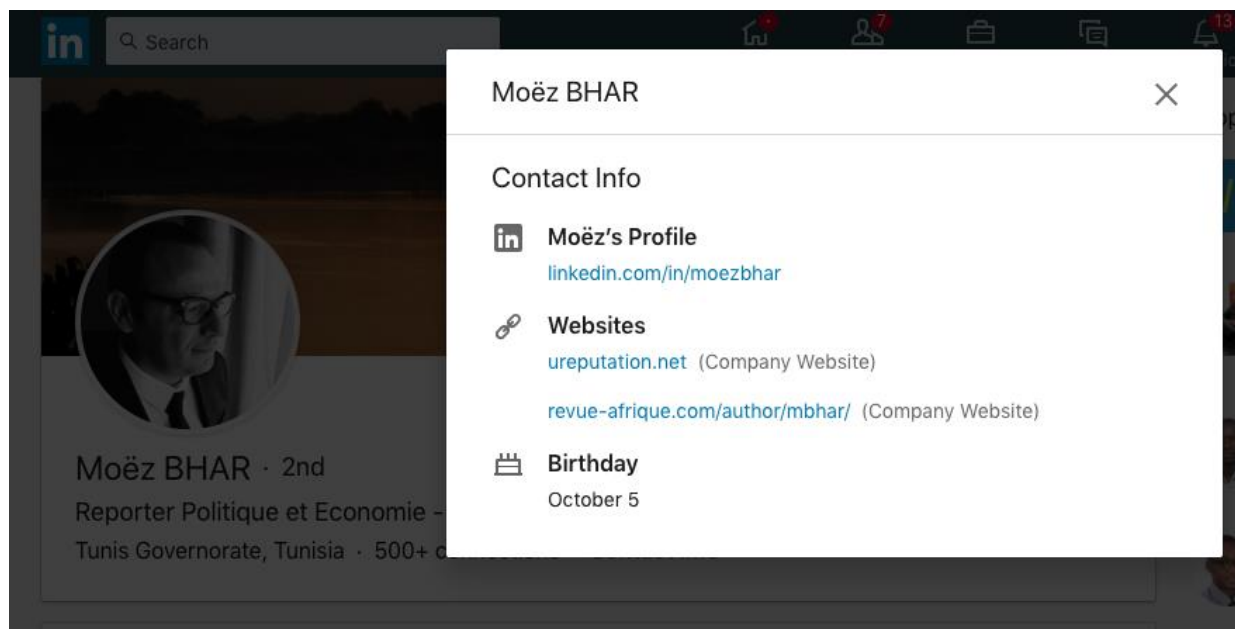
An open source review of “Fake News Checking” and its online presence raised additional questions. Its Twitter account, @FakeCheckingTN, featured tweets going back no further than August 2019, despite the fact the account was created in February 2015. Using Twitter’s advance search capability to identify tweets from other users that had replied to now-deleted posts from the account written prior to August 2019, the DFRLab determined that @FakeCheckingTN was previously a Tunisian news service known as @360\_tn. After the name change, @360\_tn was reestablished on an entirely [new Twitter account](#), which at the time of publishing had no tweets and only one follower.

The original @360\_tn Twitter account was affiliated with the defunct website 360.tn. According to a [LinkedIn search](#) for the website, it was formally edited by journalist Frédéric Geldhof. He now serves as [editor](#) for another site, [Le Muslim Post](#), which according to the Francophone news outlets [Le Temps](#) and [Le Point](#) is financially backed by a Tunisian-French businessman based in Barcelona named Lotfi Bel Hadj. Bel Hadj’s name would subsequently resurface over the course of this investigation.



## Fact-checking the fact-checkers

According to his [LinkedIn bio](#), Moëz Bhar, the co-founder of “Fake News Checking,” is an “expert on cyberinfluence and digital intelligence.” An [October 2019 screenshot](#) of his Twitter account preserved by the Internet Archive noted he is also a contributor to the websites [Revue de L’Afrique](#) and [Afrika News](#). His LinkedIn contact page references [Revue de L’Afrique](#), as well as a website called [ureputation.net](#).



Moëz Bhar's LinkedIn page. (Source: [LinkedIn](#))

According to the website, UReputation is a communications agency specializing in digital intelligence and “cyberinfluence,” including “sending targeted messages to specific categories of recipients to influence their perception of a brand or personality.” According to Bhar’s LinkedIn profile, he has worked with the company since June 2014.

In an [interview with the DFRLab](#) in October 2019, Bhar described the team behind the Fake News Checking site as “five friends completely separate from any sectors of activity; we are not part of any political party or any organization or company.” At the time, though, Bhar was a supporter of Tunisian presidential candidate Nabil Karoui, who by then had made it into the runoff. “My personal opinions never interfere with what we do and post on our website,” he stated. “The proof is there with all our fact-checks.”

Reviewing Bhar’s other professional projects, however, raised more questions. *Revue de L’Afrique*, whose domain name [revue-afrique.com](#) was [first registered](#) by a company called Digital Kevlar in May 2014, is a pan-African Francophone news site that covers topics ranging from sports to politics. According to its [about page](#), the site is run by seven journalists, including Bhar, though the other six journalists have all been suspended by Twitter, and their photos and bios do not appear to match up with any other known individuals, according to searches for them conducted on Google and Yandex.

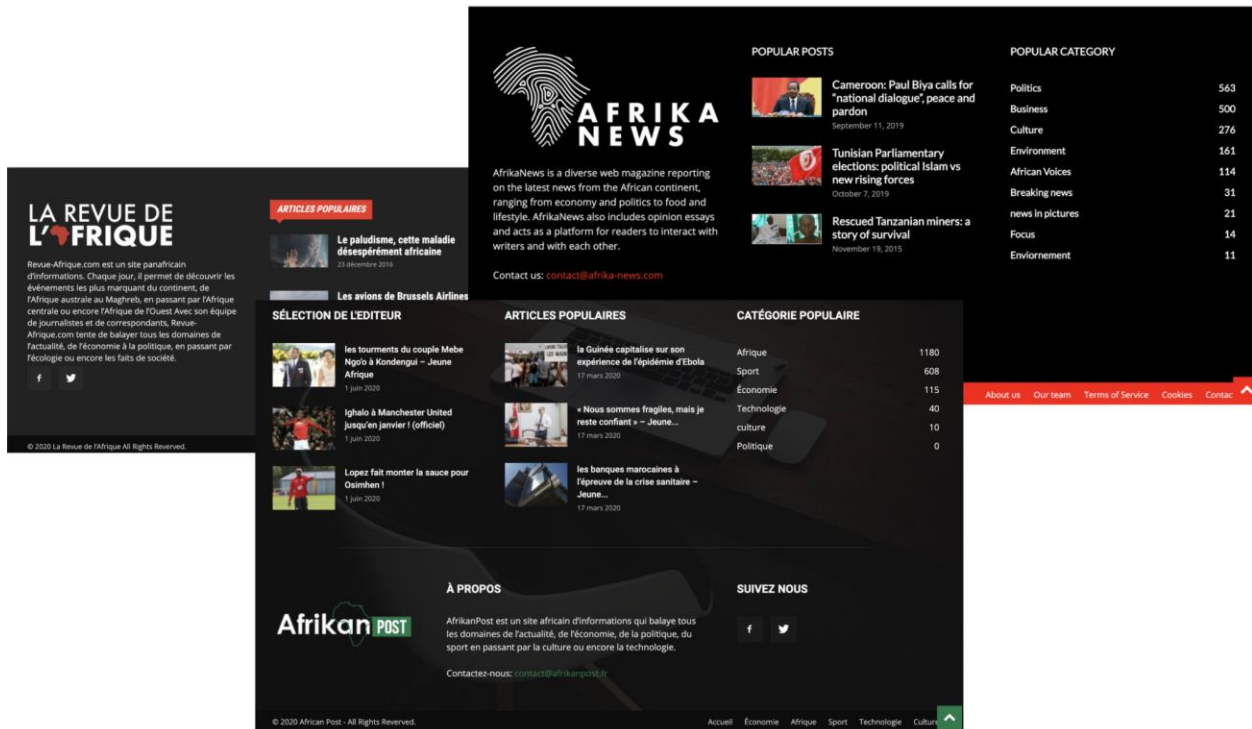
Bhar's other affiliation is the website [Afrika News](#). As of May 28, 2020, the [lead story](#) on the site was identical to a story appearing on [Revue de L'Afrique](#), with one notable difference: the author's name had been changed from "Salima Traore" to "Selassie Alitash." *Afrika News* is also plagued by mysterious authors. According to its [staff page](#), the bios of its four journalists all feature suspended Twitter accounts and descriptions of individuals that were not traceable elsewhere.

<p><b>Alitash Selassie</b></p> <p>is a journalist and a re Ethiopia, she pursued l England, LSJ. Very act workshops that explor covered a number of e through her articles. S voice of Africa in the ir</p> <p><b>@AlitashSelassie</b></p> <p><b>Account suspended</b> Twitter suspends accounts which violate the <a href="#">Twitter Rules</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You can follow her on twitter @AlitashSelassie.</li> <li>Her Email: <a href="mailto:Alitash.Selassie@afrika-news.com">Alitash.Selassie@afrika-news.com</a></li> </ul>	<p><b>Nassoumi Nyang</b></p> <p>is a writer and research English literature. She is across Africa to explore with the victims of viole Born in Nairobi, Nyang's</p> <p><b>@NassoumiNyang</b></p> <p><b>Account suspended</b> Twitter suspends accounts which violate the <a href="#">Twitter Rules</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You can follow her on twitter @NassoumiNyang</li> <li>her by email at: <a href="mailto:Nassoumi.nyang@afrika-news.com">Nassoumi.nyang@afrika-news.com</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Anabel Ynug</b></p> <p>studied in Nigeria, befo journalism. He works a about the conflicts in th web magazine that cov contributions in the me cutting-edge issues had where he interned for T</p> <p><b>@AnabelYnug</b></p> <p><b>Account suspended</b> Twitter suspends accounts which violate the <a href="#">Twitter Rules</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow him on twitter @AnabelYnug.</li> <li>His Email <a href="mailto:Anabel.Yung@afrika-news.com">Anabel.Yung@afrika-news.com</a></li> </ul>	<p><b>Denis TUTU</b></p> <p>Born and raised in South and cultural subjects. He He majored in journalisr Africa and in the United that promotes African cu</p> <p><b>@DenisTUTU1</b></p> <p><b>Account suspended</b> Twitter suspends accounts which violate the <a href="#">Twitter Rules</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact him via email at: <a href="mailto:Denis.tutu@afrika-news.com">Denis.tutu@afrika-news.com</a></li> <li>follow him on twitter: @DenisTUTU1</li> </ul>

*Staff bios from Afrika News and their suspended Twitter accounts. (Source: [Afrika News](#) and Twitter)*

A further review of Bhar's social media presence and the sites' domain name histories added to the mystery. *Revue-Afrique.com*'s original registrar, Digital Kevlar, purchased domain names for at least two other news outlets, *Actu-France.com* and *eco-mag.com*, while *Afrika-News.com* was [registered](#) by an organization called Info Halal. *Actu France* focuses on France-related news, though its [about page](#) is blank, while *Eco Mag*, which covers business, features [three staff writers](#) with the same *modus operandi* as the others – suspended Twitter accounts and dead-end bios.

Along with featuring mysterious authors, the outlets' Facebook pages revealed unusual patterns. *Afrika News* and *Eco Mag* both launched their pages on the same day – July 8, 2016. Their “related pages” sections led to another site, [Afrikanpost.fr](http://Afrikanpost.fr), whose website footer is similar in design to both [Afrika News](http://Afrika News) and [Revue de L’Afrique](http://Revue de L’Afrique). It also sports a lack of identifiable writers, all the while appearing to cull content from other news outlets. Eventually, the DFRLab would identify more than two dozen Facebook pages claiming to be legitimate news outlets that were subsequently removed by Facebook as part of its June 2020 takedown.



Footers of some of the websites affiliated with assets in the takedown.  
 (Source: [Afrika News](http://Afrika News); [African Post](http://African Post); and [Revue de L’Afrique](http://Revue de L’Afrique))

## The man known as LBH

Through the course of the DFRLab’s investigation, the name of Tunisian French businessman Lotfi Bel Hadj popped up on multiple occasions, initially in relation to *Le Muslim Post*. His [bio](#) on *Huffingtonpost.fr* describes him as “an economist by training and entrepreneur,” as well as the author of the book *The Halal Bible*, in which he discusses the economics of the halal food industry. He is a former contributor to *Revue de L’Afrique*; a [deleted story](#) he wrote on cryptocurrency preserved on the Internet Archive described him as a “serial entrepreneur” and founder of a company known as the Digital Big Brother Fund. *HuffPost Maghreb*, which shut down in late 2019, [also noted his role](#) as chairman of the Digital Big Brother Fund and another organization, the LBH Foundation, in an op-ed he wrote defending Tunisian presidential candidate Nabil Karoui, who at the time had been jailed on [money laundering and tax fraud](#) charges. “Nabil Karoui is not in prison for what he did,” Bel Hadj wrote. “Today, a minimum of decency would mean that each Tunisian respects a fundamental principle of any Republic worthy of that name: the presumption of innocence.”

Bel Hadj’s business interests run far and wide. He was [co-founder](#) of an alternative energy company called Alternative Carbon; he was a director at a now-dissolved mineral company, [Zamarat Mining](#), and co-founder of Greenrock Fund Management, [incorporated](#) in Luxembourg. Meanwhile, incorporation records for a company called [Digital Big Brother](#) identify Lotfi Bel Hadj as its owner, listing “Carrer del Rosselló 218” in Barcelona as its address – a clue that would gain in importance as the investigation progressed.

### DIGITAL BIG BROTHER SL

Information about the company

- Active NIF / CIF: B66969965
- Date of last event at BORME: 02/19/2019
- Sector: Not available
- Carrer del Rosselló, 218, 08008 Barcelona, España | [See on the map](#)

DIRECTORS

Current positions

Company Name	Position	Appointment Date
LOTFI BEL HADJ	Administrador único	05/04/2017

*Business incorporation records for Digital Big Brother SL. (Source: [infoempresa.com](#))*

While the exact connection between Lotfi Bel Hadj and UReputation remains somewhat unclear, open source evidence suggests multiple links between them. A March 2019 conference near Tunis co-organized by UReputation and *HuffPost Maghreb* lists the [LBH Foundation](#) as host, while his [former website](#) lotfibelhadj.com was registered by a Tunis-based company listed as “Urepuation” – note the misspelling – which also registered [several domains](#) related to the halal food industry.

#### List of domain names registered by **Urepuation**

Domain Name	Creation Date	Registrar
<a href="#">wow-series.com</a>	2017-10-11	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">halal-valley.com</a>	2015-03-12	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">halal-tracking.com</a>	2015-03-12	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">dar-al-halal.com</a>	2015-02-20	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">lotfibelhadj.com</a>	2016-04-13	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">alyacity.com</a>	2017-02-28	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">lotfibelhadj.net</a>	2016-05-12	publicdomainregistry.com
<a href="#">groupe-sis.com</a>	2015-02-13	publicdomainregistry.com

*List of domains registered by “Urepuation,” including Lotfi Bel Hadj’s eponymous website.  
(Source: [Domain Big Data](#))*

Notably, the person who registered the domains, a woman named [Emna Raissi](#), lists Lotfi Bel Hadj, Moëz Bhar, and other individuals connected to Ureputation among her Facebook friends.

## The 2019 Tunisian presidential campaign

After the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi in late July 2019, the Tunisian government announced a new election in which candidates would be winnowed down to the top two vote-getters before facing a runoff in October 2019. Essebsi's prime minister, Youssef Chahed, announced his candidacy, as did several others, including Tunisian media entrepreneur Nabil Karoui and constitutional scholar Kais Saied. Chahed's candidacy fell short, with Karoui facing Saied in a runoff, ultimately losing to Saied, who is now serving as Tunisia's president.

As noted earlier, both Moëz Bhar and Lotfi Bel Hadj publicly proclaimed their support for Karoui, despite Bhar's involvement in the ostensibly independent Tunisian "Fake News Checking" Facebook page and website. As the campaign approached its climax, Bhar tweeted about Karoui's incarceration, with one tweet in particular linking to [yet another suspicious news site](#), Maghreb-Info.com.



*Moëz Bhar tweeting a pro-Karoui article from maghreb-info.com. ( Source: @moezbhar/Twitter)*

Along with a site design similar to *Revue de l'Afrique* and *Afrika News*, *Maghreb Info's* [staff page](#) is replete with unidentifiable journalists with suspended Twitter accounts. It also featured [positive stories](#) about Karoui.

## Nabil Karoui, populiste ou visionnaire ?

Amel Abdallah / 11 Octobre 2019

Ce jeudi soir, vingt-quatre heures après sa libération, Nabil Karoui était invité sur El Hiwar Ettounsi, où il a pu concrètement débiter sa campagne politique.

« Si j'avais dit que j'allais rendre le prix de la baguette à 20 millimes ou que j'allais construire un pont entre la Tunisie et un autre pays, vous auriez pu me taxer de populisme ». Invité hier soir sur El Hiwar Ettounsi, Nabil Karoui a tenu à mettre les choses au clair : il parle au « vrai peuple », alors que « la moitié de la classe moyenne est devenue pauvre », a-t-il affirmé. Outre son incarcération, jugée depuis illégale, et l'affaire du contrat de lobbying, le finaliste à la présidentielle a tenu à rattraper son retard dans la campagne en parlant politique et réformes. Mais a-t-il convaincu ?

Le constat est en tout cas honnête : il existe aujourd'hui une « Tunisie à deux vitesses », c'est indéniable. Nabil Karoui parle également de « rupture entre ceux qui sont à Carthage, à la Kasbah ou au Bardo et le vrai peuple ». Le vote du 15 septembre dernier confirme cette impression : les citoyens tunisiens ont donné leurs voix à deux candidats qui se disent anti-système, mettant ainsi un coup fatal au pouvoir en place, même si le parti Ennahdha a de son côté limité la casse. Quoi qu'il advienne après le 13 octobre, Nabil Karoui promet en tout cas que son parti ne sera « jamais dans le gouvernement d'Ennahdha ».

### Ambassadeur des Gafa et pacte contre la pauvreté

Du côté des propositions, Nabil Karoui mise sur une nouvelle vision de la présidence : « J'irai dans tout le pays et je verrai ce qui s'y passe et ferai des propositions au gouvernement (...) jusqu'à ce qu'on arrive à des résultats », explique le finaliste que assure que l'on va « voir un président de la République différent de ce que vous aviez eu l'habitude de voir » et qui veut être « l'intermédiaire entre le peuple et le gouvernement ». Du populisme ? Nabil Karoui, lui, se voit plutôt comme un Macron

*“Nabil Karoui, populist or visionary?” (Source: [maghreb-info.com](http://maghreb-info.com))*

Écrivez ici et tapez Entrer



#### LES ARTICLES RÉCENTS



Russes et Turcs, nouveaux maîtres du jeu en Libye ?



Un documentaire diffusé en France provoque la colère d'Alger



Aliou Boubacar Diallo prend la tête du groupe parlementaire Benso



EST-WAC : le président de la CAF Ahmad Ahmad témoignera



Meanwhile, the “Fake News Checking” Facebook page offered a tantalizing clue: a “related page” recommendation to another page known as “Élections en Tunisie.” Related pages appear in the right-hand column of Facebook pages, determined by an algorithm that predicts potential connections between them. The page, along with its website [élection.com](http://election.com), presented itself as a neutral information source on the Tunisian election, including who was running and when the vote would take place.

While most of the posts appeared to be straightforward coverage of the election, some posts drew scrutiny from users, including an unsourced poll claiming that Nabil Karoui had a significant lead over the other candidates prior to first round of voting. The poll supposedly tabulated election preferences of more than 420,000 voters – despite the fact that most political polls are based on sample sizes in the hundreds or thousands - with Karoui leading with 23.2 percent prior to the first-round vote, compared to 16.48 percent for Abdelfattah Mourou and 13.8 percent for Kais Saied. The poll results were [nowhere near accurate](#); when first-round voting took place three days later, Karoui received only 15.6 percent, compared to Saied at 18.4 percent and Morou at 12.88 percent.

Élections en Tunisie - 2019 إنتخابات تونس

September 12, 2019

La plus récente et plus grande consultation en Tunisie, réalisée du 10 mai jusqu'à aujourd'hui, 12 septembre 2019, et qui a touché un peu plus de 420.000 électeurs.

1. Nabil Karoui
2. Abdelfattah Mourou
3. Kais Saied... See More

See Translation

Candidate	Percentage
1. Nabil Karoui	23.20%
2. Abdelfattah Mourou	16.48%
3. Kais Saied	13.80%
4. [Candidate]	11.46%
5. [Candidate]	11.09%
6. [Candidate]	8.53%
7. [Candidate]	6.76%
8. [Candidate]	3.04%
9. [Candidate]	2.98%
10. [Candidate]	1.65%
11. [Candidate]	1.01%
12. [Candidate]	1.01%

2.9K likes, 2.4K Comments, 574 Shares

Pre-election poll posted to “[Élections en Tunisie](#)” page. (Source: Facebook)

A brief review of domain names associated with the names of the two remaining candidates turned up some curious results. While various combinations of Nabil Karoui’s name – [nabilkaroui.com](#), [nabilkaroui.net](#), and so on – turned up nothing of interest, a [WHOIS search for kaissaied.com](#) turned up a familiar name and address: DBB, Avenue Roseleo, Barcelona, a near-identical listing to Lotfi Bel Hadj’s [Digital Big Brother address](#) at Carrer del Rosselló, Barcelona. Searches in Google Maps could not turn up a location for “Avenue Roseleo,” instead suggesting it is a misspelling and [pointing to Carrer del Rosselló](#) instead.



kaissaied.com <span style="float: right;">Updated 1 second ago ↻</span>	
<b>Domain Information</b>	
Domain:	kaissaied.com
Registrar:	Internet Domain Service BS Corp
Registered On:	2019-09-17
Expires On:	2020-09-17
Updated On:	2019-09-17
Status:	clientTransferProhibited
<b>Registrant Contact</b>	
Name:	Not disclosed Not disclosed
Organization:	DBB
Street:	avenue roseleo espana
City:	barcelona
Postal Code:	08080
Country:	ES

*WHOIS search for kaissaied.com showed a physical address that closely mirrored that of Lotfi Bel Hadj's Digital Big Brother address. (Source: [whois.com](https://whois.com))*

Based on its initial review of these various online assets, the DFRLab contacted Facebook in October 2019 as part of its ongoing [election integrity partnership](#) with the company to see if their systems could detect any coordinated inauthentic behavior that could not be identified through traditional open source research methods. A subsequent Facebook investigation resulted in their decision to take down the Tunisian network in June 2020, including Bhar's and Bel Hadj's Facebook accounts, as well as the pages for "Fake News Checking," "Élections en Tunisie," *Revue Afrique*, *Afrika News*, *Afrikan Post*, *Le Muslim Post*, and others they deemed were engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior.

And it turned out that Tunisia was just the tip of the iceberg.

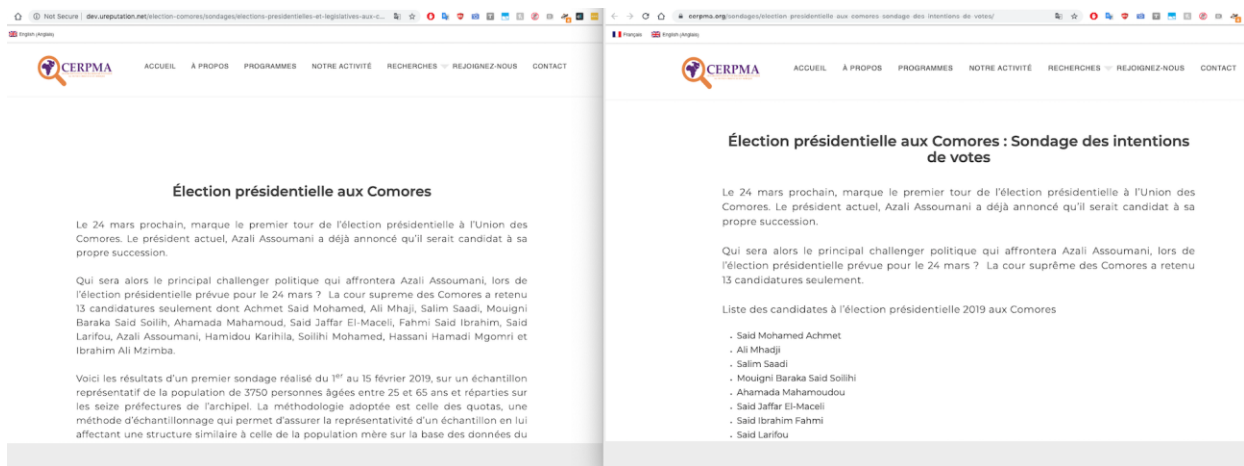
## The Comoros Connection

While conducting its initial investigation, the DFRLab discovered what appeared to be a network of websites and Facebook assets created with the intent to exert political influence in multiple African nations, including Senegal, Guinea, Congo, Madagascar, and Chad. One notable example that took place six months before the Tunisian presidential runoff was the presidential election in the small island nation of Comoros.

In this particular case, the discovery came from a review of UReputation's website using the domain name monitoring tool [Security Trails](#). Security Trails found more than [two dozen subdomains](#), including dev.ureputation.net, which at the time appeared to be server space for website testing.

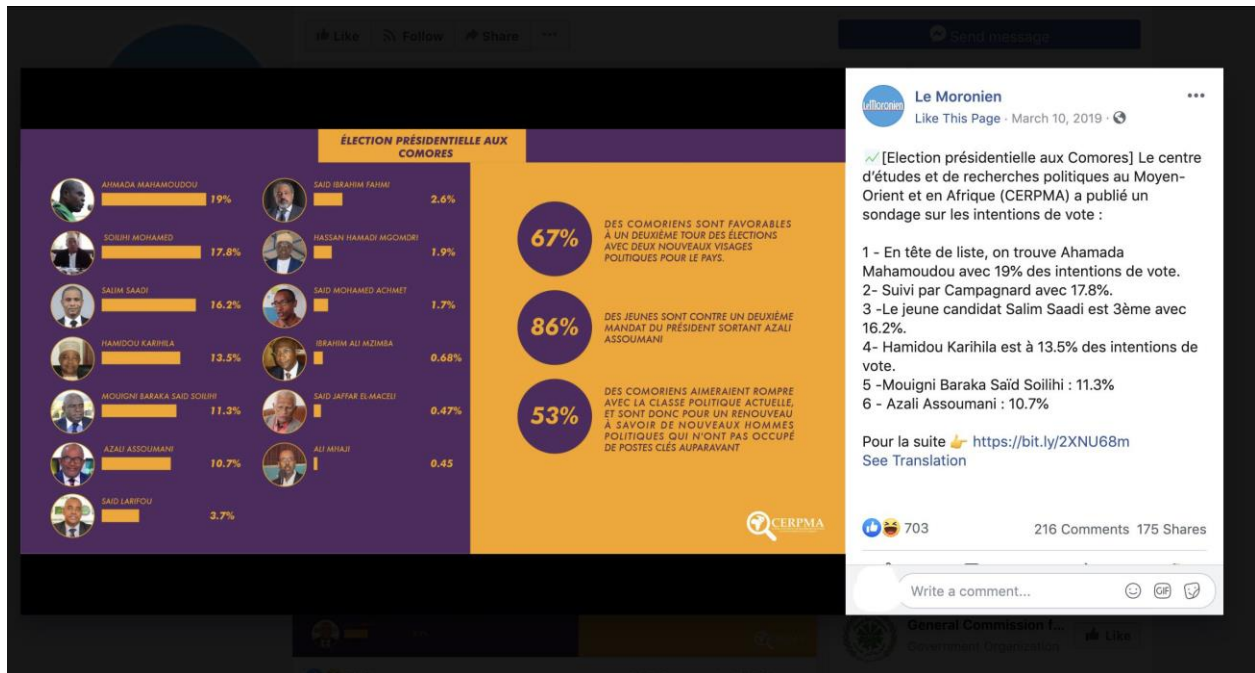
With this information in hand, the DFRLab conducted a simple Google search for dev.ureputation.net to see if any pages had been crawled by Google and discovered multiple pages, including a page called dev.ureputation.net/ico, which was a mockup for a cryptocurrency release, or initial coin offering, for a digital coin called Kevlar. It does not appear that the currency was developed any further.

Another page within the subdomain, however, was particularly noteworthy. Labeled dev.ureputation.net/election-comoros, it displayed a copy of a website for a polling firm called CERPMA. A further Google search identified a website, cerpma.org, which was nearly identical to the UReputation mockup. For example, one page on the UReputation server presented analysis on the Comoros presidential election in French. The same page appeared nearly verbatim on cerpma.org, with only a slightly different layout for the text.



*A page from dev.ureputation.net and cerpma.org, shown side-by-side.  
(Source: ureputation.net and CERPMA.org)*

Exploring the cerpma.org site, it became clear it was presenting itself as a neutral polling firm offering political analysis, including polls that could not be traced to actual polling. One of these polls was easily found on Facebook with a simple word search for “CERPMA.” It led to a Facebook page appearing to be a Comorian news outlet, [Le Moronien](#). On March 10, 2019, two weeks prior to the presidential election, the page featured a CERPMA “poll” that did not seem to have any basis in reality, displaying incumbent president Azali Assoumani trailing in sixth place at less than 11 percent.



CERPMA poll posted by Le Moronien. (Source: Facebook)

In contrast to Assoumani, another candidate, Solihi Mohamed, was running a close second place in the questionable poll. *Le Moronien* posted [glowing tributes](#) to Mohamed, stating that he “stands today in presidential elections as the most credible and patriotic among the other candidates.”



*Le Moronien supporting opposition candidate Solihi Mohamed. (Source: Facebook)*

Subsequent searches by the DFRLab for Assoumani’s reelection campaign turned up another Facebook page, simply titled “Azali Assoumani.” The page, created the same day as *Le Moronien*, depicted Assoumani as a dictator, including showing his image on a pack of cigarettes.



*Anti-Assoumani messaging on the “Azali Assoumani” page. (Source: Facebook)*

On March 24, 2019, Assoumani [won re-election](#), with more than 60 percent of the vote.

In its [October 2019 interview](#) with Moëz Bhar, the DFRLab raised the question of the CERPMA site appearing on UReputation’s website and *Le Moronien* on Facebook. Bhar denied any knowledge of either CERPMA or *Le Moronien*. Later that same day, the CERPMA pages on dev.ureputation.net became inaccessible to the public.

## Ongoing influence operations in Africa

Upon receiving the assets that Facebook turned up in its own investigation, the DFRLab reviewed more than 500 pages, groups, user accounts, and Instagram accounts representing 10 countries, including Chad, Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Tunisia. Not all of these assets appeared overtly problematic; in fact, it became clear that some of them represented what might be considered more typical online marketing work, including pages for musicians, restaurants, and even doctors. Others, though, raised multiple red flags, weaving together a web of online activities with all the hallmarks of political influence operations, including ones targeting two presidential campaigns: the February 2020 election in Togo and the upcoming October 2020 election in Côte d'Ivoire.

### *Togo*

The set of Facebook assets reviewed by the DFRLab featured dozens of pages from the small West African country of Togo, including many that were straightforward online marketing campaigns developed over a multi-year period. But a new crop of content began appearing on Facebook in January 2020, all with a very clear theme – the reelection of Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé, who was running under the French campaign slogan “Tous Faure” (“All for Faure”).

Faure was originally [installed by the Togolese army](#) as president of Togo upon the 2005 death of his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who had ruled the country since a 1967 military coup. Faure has remained the primary political force in the country ever since, winning reelection three times. Despite efforts by the opposition to force Faure to accept [term limits](#), he ran for a fourth term in office in February 2020.

Over the course of January 2020, at least 11 new pages appeared on Facebook in support of Faure, according to the Facebook dataset, many with administrators based in Tunisia. Two of them, “Jeunes Cadres Unir” (January 7) and “Allons-Y FEG 2020” (January 9), were little more than placeholder pages and subsequently abandoned. Despite being dead ends, the page names were revealing. “Jeunes Cadres Unir” translates to “Unir youth cadres,” in reference to young supporters of Faure’s Union for the Republic of Togo party, or *Unir* in French. “Allons-Y FEG 2020,” or “Let’s go FEG 2020,” is a reference to Faure’s initials: Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé.

Over the next several days, additional Facebook pages appeared, including “Diaspora engagée” (January 10), which appeared to target Togolese Facebook users living outside the country; “Les Evangiles de Faure” (“The Gospels of Faure,” January 11); and “Allons-y” (“Let’s go,” January 13). Of the three pages, “Allons-y” was by far the most successful, growing to nearly 30,000 followers in its first month. Featuring campaign photos of Faure and his slogan *Tous Faure*, “Allons-y” described itself in French on its about page as “a Togolese citizen movement” in support of the president.

The following week, a new crop of pages appeared, with one emerging on January 14 and two others on January 15. “[Jeunes Cadres Faure](#)” appears to be a fully produced version

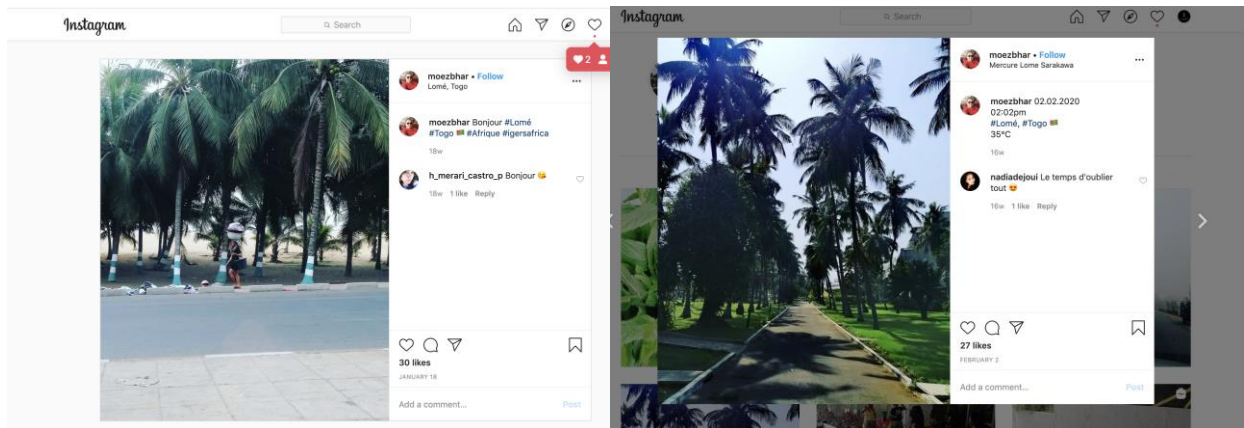
of the hastily created “Jeunes Cadres Unir” that launched on January 7; it grew to more than 11,000 followers. This was soon joined by “[Togofaure](#),” with more than 27,000 followers, and “[Présidentielle Togo](#),” with approximately 9,000 followers. Additional pages would follow between January 20 and January 30, all dedicated to Faure’s opponents, including “[Wolou Komi 2020](#),” “[Go Kodjo](#),” and “[Tous avec Jean Pierre Fabre](#).” None of these pages were as highly produced as some of the pro-Faure pages, and featured a fraction of the followers. It is possible they were created to be weaponized against the opposing candidates, but there is no evidence that this ever took place.

Along with the new crop of political pages, multiple assets claiming to be Togolese news outlets appeared on Facebook for the first time during the same time period. The pro-Faure “[L’Observateur Togolais](#),” for example, made its debut on January 22, eventually growing to more than 40,000 followers. The following day, “Actu Salade” premiered. The day after that came “Leloo TV,” which featured videos mocking Faure opponent Agbéyomé Kodjo.



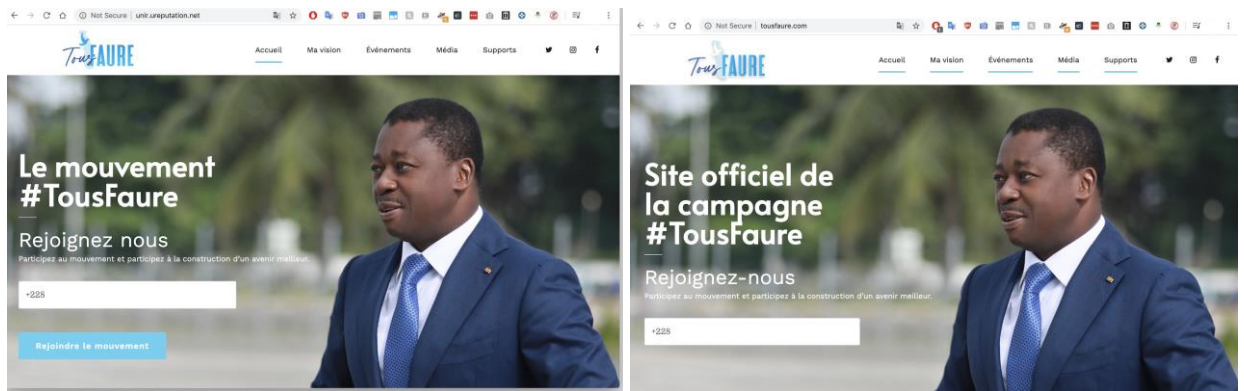
*Faure opponent Agbéyomé Kodjo being “interviewed” on Leloo TV.  
(Source: [Leloo TV](#)/YouTube)*

Away from Facebook, a number of websites previously analyzed by the DFRLab during the Tunisian presidential election began to produce pro-Faure content, including stories published by [Afrika News](#) and [Revue Afrique](#), both of which employ Moëz Bhar. Meanwhile, Bhar appears to have made a visit to Togo during this same time period. According to his Instagram feed, he visited the country between January 17 and January 25, though there is no evidence to suggest he visited the country due to the upcoming election.



Instagram feed of Moëz Bhar documenting a January 2020 visit to Togo. (Source: Instagram)

Meanwhile, it appears that the server administrators of the ureputation.net website had added several new subdomains to their server. Using the tool [Security Trails](#), the DFRLab discovered additional subdomains, including [unir.ureputation.net](#), several days before Facebook announced its June 2020 takedown. The subdomain featured a nearly exact copy of Faure’s official campaign page, [tousfaure.com](#), strongly suggesting that UReputation was involved in the page’s development for the campaign.



unir.ureputation.com’s Tous Faure page vs. tousfaure.com. (Source: [UReputation](#) and [tousfaure.com](#))

On February 24, 2020, Faure Gnassingbé was re-elected in a [landslide](#). It remains unclear whether the influence campaign had any direct impact on his election. All of the pages were subsequently taken down by Facebook.

### Côte d’Ivoire

In addition to the operation in Togo, the Facebook takedown revealed an ongoing campaign to influence the upcoming October 2020 presidential election in Côte d’Ivoire. At least 50 Facebook pages, groups, and other assets were dedicated to supporting former Ivorian president Henri Konan Bédié, also known as HKB, and his Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire — African Democratic Rally (“PDCI-RDA” in French). The PDCI dominated Ivorian politics for decades until Bédié was overthrown in a 1999 coup. After several years in exile, including France and Togo, Bédié returned to Côte d’Ivoire and resumed his role in politics. Today, he is once again presenting himself as a potential presidential candidate

following current Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara’s March 2020 decision [not to seek re-election](#).

Unlike the influence operation created to support Faure’s 2020 re-election in Togo, many of the Facebook assets that were taken down for attempting to influence the Côte d’Ivoire election are several years old. By the time the most recent page was launched in March 2020, at least 20 pages had been created as part of the influence campaign.

The oldest assets in the network involved a trio of Facebook pages launched in 2016 supporting Bédié and the PDCI-RDA. Two of them, “Je Suis PdcI-Rda” and “PDCI RDA,” posted communiques and press releases from the party, as well as quotes from Bédié. They also operated a pair of Instagram accounts, both launched in 2016. A third page, “Tempête PDCI-RDA,” put more emphasis on trolling HKB’s opponents.



Pro-HKB messaging on “Je Suis PdcI-Rda.” (Source: Facebook)





“PDCI RDA” page. (Source: Facebook)



“Tempête PDCI-RDA” mocks an Ivorian news outlet for not being critical of the rival RDR party. (Source: Facebook)

The pattern continued in 2018 when two more PDCI-RDA pages launched, one allegedly the party's radio station and the other its television network.

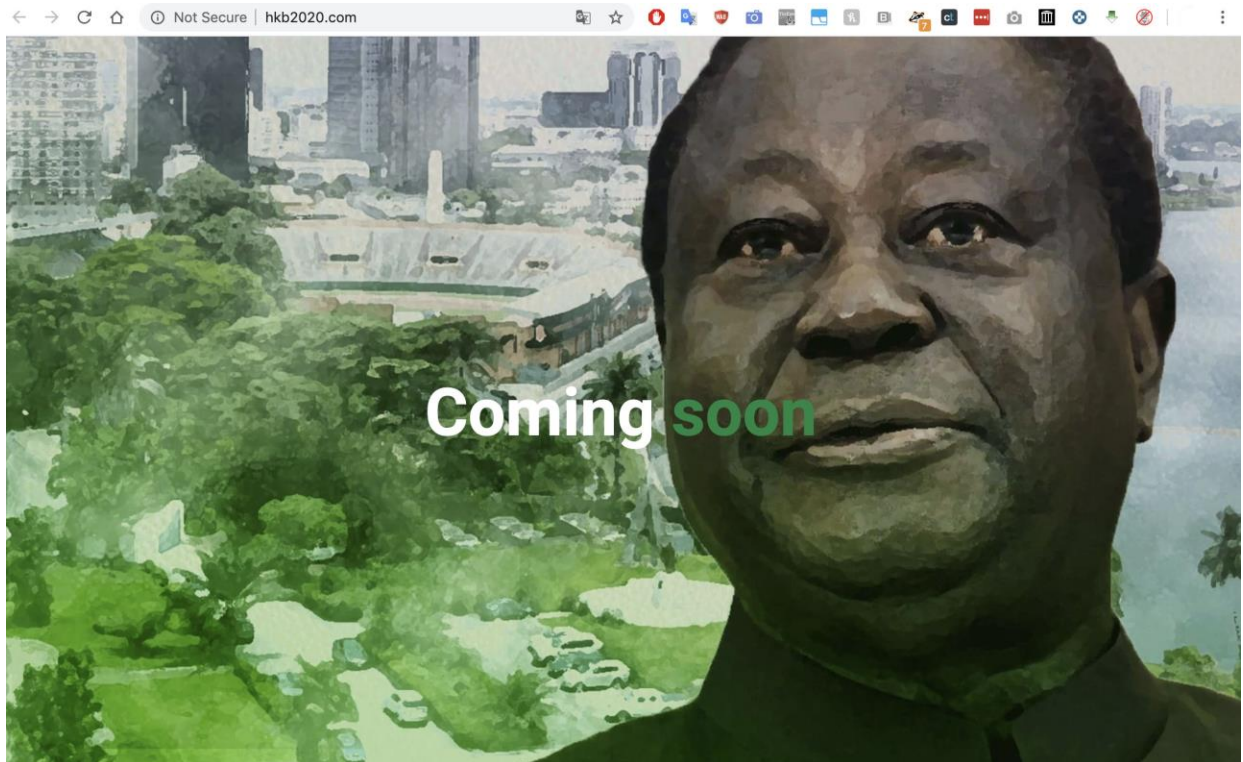


*"Radio PDCI RDA" page saying "Bye Bye" to the rival RDR party. (Source: Facebook)*



*"PDCI TV" post declaring that the time to restore Bédié had come. (Source: Facebook)*

From 2019 until the time of the Facebook takedown, the campaign created at least 11 new Facebook pages, as well as several Instagram accounts. Unlike some of the previous Facebook pages that focused more broadly on partisan Ivorian politics, many of the new pages were expressly designed to promote the candidacy of Bédié, including “Henri Konan Bédié” (October 2019), “hkbofficiel” (November 2019) and “Objectif Palais Présidentiel” (April 2020). “Henri Konan Bédié,” with more than 60,000 followers, as well as its accompanying Instagram account, pointed to the website [hkb2020.com](http://hkb2020.com), which shows a stylized image of Bédié and the phrase “coming soon.”



Placeholder website for [hkb2020.com](http://hkb2020.com). (Source: [hkb2020.com](http://hkb2020.com))

Given that the page is serving as a placeholder, its future role in the campaign remains unknown. The entity that registered it, however, was readily identifiable through a [WHOIS search](#). The domain [hkb2020.com](http://hkb2020.com) was registered in September 2019 by “DBB” located on Avenue Roseleo in Barcelona – the same address associated with the purchase of [kaissaied.com](http://kaissaied.com) during the Tunisian election, as well as an almost exact match to Lotfi Bel Hadj’s Digital Big Brother address.

**Whois** last record, updated : 2019-10-21

Domain Name: HKB2020.COM  
 Registry Domain ID:  
 Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.internet.bs  
 Registrar URL: http://www.internetbs.net  
 Updated Date: 2019-10-21T11:08:10Z  
 Creation Date: 2019-09-03T14:05:42Z  
 Registrar Registration Expiration Date: 2020-09-03T14:05:42Z  
 Registrar: Internet Domain Service BS Corp.  
 Registrar IANA ID: 2487  
 Registrar Abuse Contact Email: abuse(at)internet.bs  
 Registrar Abuse Contact Phone: +1.5167401179  
 Reseller:  
 Domain Status: ok - http://www.icann.org/epp#ok  
 Domain Status: clientTransferProhibited - http://www.icann.org/epp#clientTransferProhibited  
 Registry Registrant ID:  
 Registrant Name: Not disclosed Not disclosed  
 Registrant Organization: DBB  
 Registrant Street: avenue roseleo espana  
 Registrant City: barcelona  
 Registrant State/Province:  
 Registrant Postal Code: 08080  
 Registrant Country: ES

*WHOIS results for hkb2020.com displaying “DBB” as the domain owner. (Source: [Domain Big Data](#))*

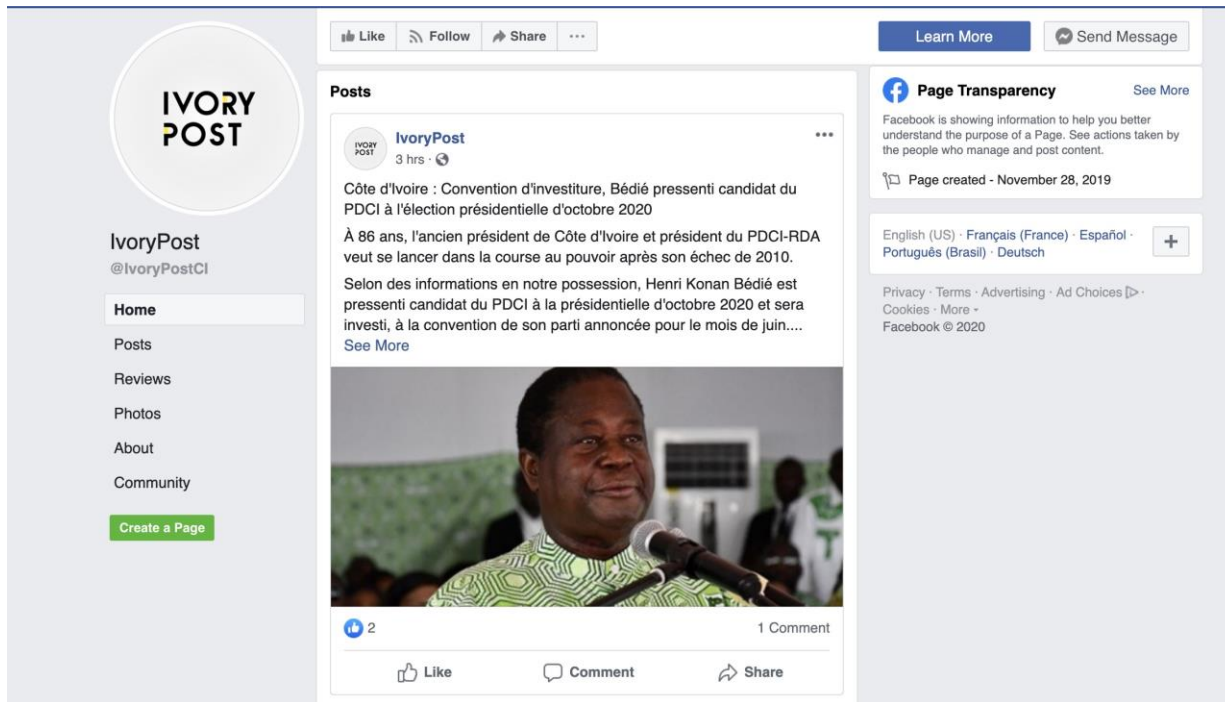
Along with political content, the operation created at least a dozen others representing themselves as news outlets, with 10 of them created between September 2019 and March 2020.

“CIV News,” which launched on September 5, 2019, came across as a straightforward news site, covering topics ranging from politics to cultural events to COVID-19. It also was not confined to Facebook; at the top of its page was a pinned post encouraging users to join its Telegram channel.



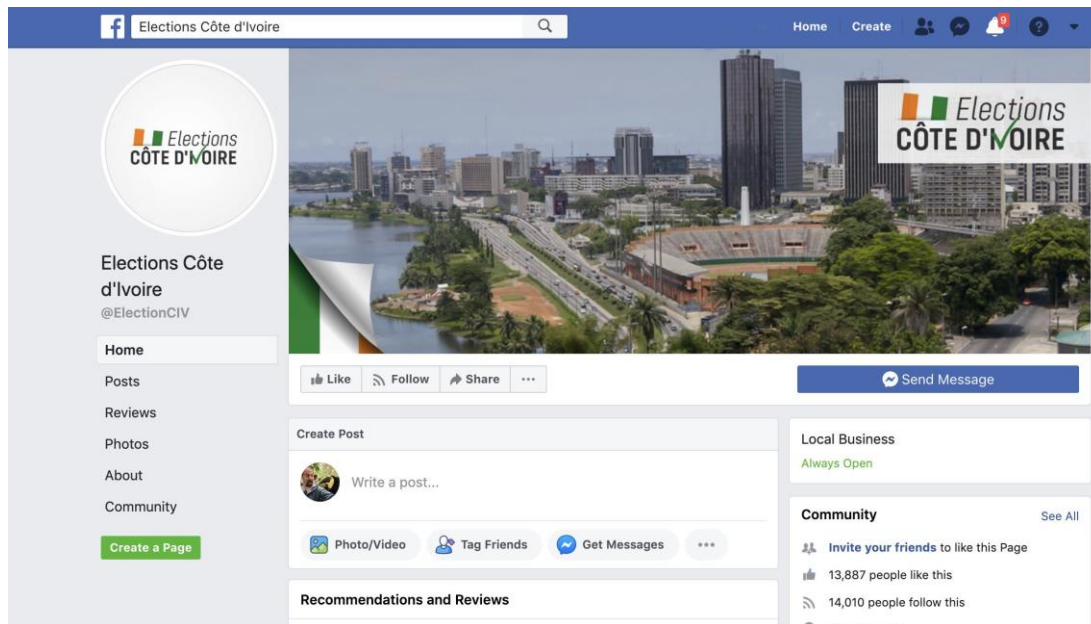
*“CIV News” promotes its Telegram channel. (Source: Facebook)*

Another operation page, “Ivory Post,” noted just prior to the Facebook takedown that Bédié was being nominated by his party to run for president in October.



“Ivory Post” story on Bédié and the presidential nomination. (Source: Facebook)

One of the last Ivorian Facebook pages to be created prior to the takedown was “Elections Côte d'Ivoire,” launched on March 10, 2020. The page presented itself as neutral information about the election, not unlike the “Élections en Tunisie” page identified in 2019. Both pages also both featured a logo with a stylized checkmark incorporated in it.

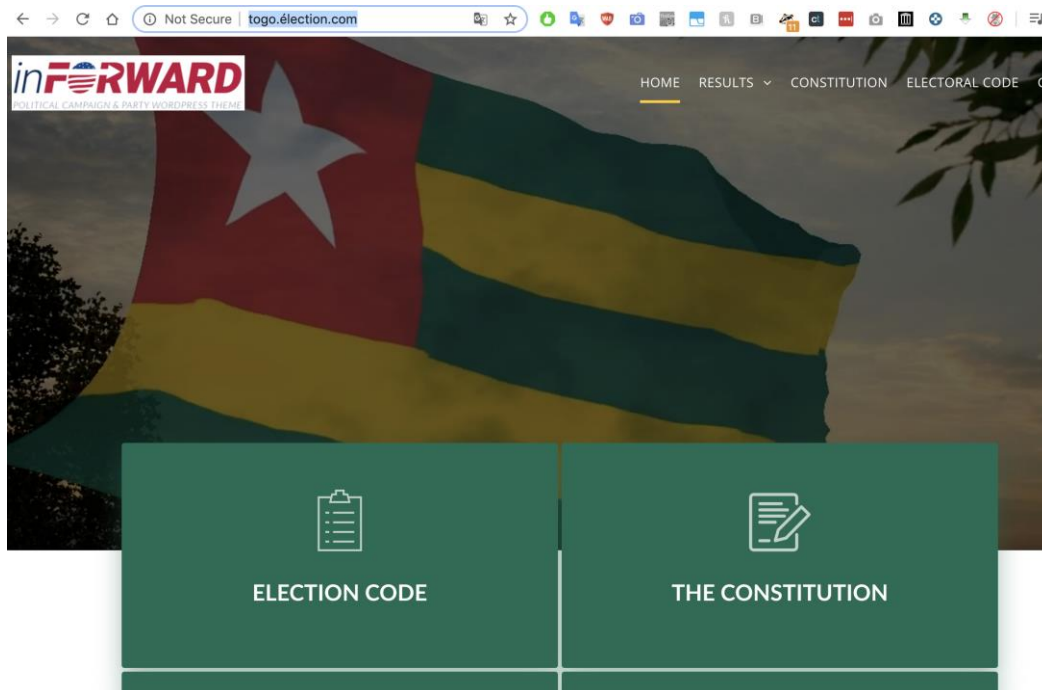


“Elections Côte d'Ivoire.” (Source: Facebook)

These observations, it would turn out, were no simple coincidence. Prior to the Facebook takedown, the DFRLab reviewed the list of subdomains associated with the “Élections en Tunisie” website, [élection.com](http://election.com), using the domain name tool [Security Trails](#). One of the subdomains listed was [cotedivoire.election.com](http://cotedivoire.election.com), which links to a page featuring the same logo as the “Elections Côte d’Ivoire” Facebook page. Intriguingly, another subdomain was labeled [togo.election.com](http://togo.election.com).



“Elections Côte d’Ivoire,” a subdomain of [élection.com](http://election.com). (Source: [cotedivoire.election.com](http://cotedivoire.election.com))



[togo.election.com](http://togo.election.com). (Source: <http://togo.election.com>)

## Conclusion

Operation Carthage, not unlike the previous Facebook takedown involving Archimedes Group, exists in a liminal world between the legitimate and illegitimate. Political communications as a profession is probably as old as politics itself; heads of governments and their rivals have always relied on the advice and assistance of professionals who understand the art of political manipulation. And while at times it can be distasteful, politics has always been a full-contact sport, with paid advisers looking to exploit a moment or leverage an opportunity whenever the chance reveals itself, particularly when an opponent's words or actions can be used against them.

Sometimes, though, the distasteful devolves into dirty tricks, using whatever means necessary to gain a political edge. Prior to the internet, this might have taken the form of unfounded rumors left in voters' mailboxes, a questionable lead provided to an unscrupulous news outlet, or in the case of Watergate, outright illegal activity. The ubiquity of social media and the ease at which digital content can be published has led to a new generation of political communicators, some of whom show no compunction about embracing methods involving mass deceit and obfuscation. This time, it was UReputation that was caught engaging in coordinating inauthentic behavior to influence elections. Tomorrow, it could be any individual or entity looking for a competitive edge in a highly competitive business. Though in truth, it is not just future efforts to push the envelope in unscrupulous digital communications that should worry us. Instead, it is those going on right now under our noses, obscured by an ever-growing information ecosystem, that should give us pause, using tricks and technologies we are only beginning to comprehend.