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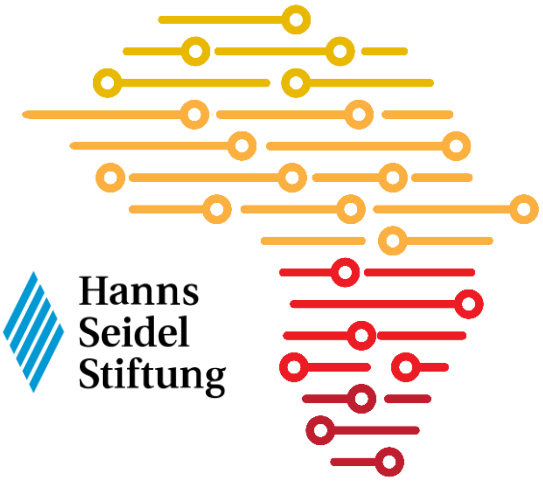
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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that social media has redefined the modalities of political communication and facilitated the organisation of collective mobilisation by opposition political parties in authoritarian regimes in Africa. Taking Cameroon and Chad as case studies, the paper shows that social networks (Facebook) have overtaken traditional communication tools and enabled opposition political parties during the electoral period to mobilise voters, encourage their participation in the vote, raise funds for the electoral campaign and ensure the transparency of the electoral system. Outside of election periods, social media allows opposition political parties to build and maintain a permanent relationship with grassroots activists. The study demonstrates that social media constitutes a threat to autocratic regimes and the way in which these regimes multiply strategies to limit their impact in the qualitative transformation of society. Using a qualitative approach and the theoretical framework of new forms of political mobilisation, the analysis is based on empirical data collected from interviews, questionnaires, observation and digital traces of the presence of four opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad. Finally, this study recommends that opposition political parties take advantage of social media to build real democracy governance in Africa in the digital age.

Key words: social media, opposition political parties, mobilisation, democratic governance, authoritarianism

Introduction

Social media is a recent phenomenon on the African continent. Favoured by the advent of the Internet (Tanjong, 2006), these instant exchange platforms have gradually become spaces for social communication and political staging. Indeed, over time types of social media have become effective instruments of politics at the service of political entrepreneurs. For example, Chang (2009) demonstrated that, in the United States, former President Barack Obama was successively elected in 2008 and 2012 using on an offensive communication strategy on social media. For his part, Donald Trump made the social media Twitter a powerful communication and governance tool. Numerous studies have confirmed the inseparable link between social media and politics (Fatema et al., 2022; Kubin and Sikorski, 2021). Pechenkina (2016) affirms that the Internet, via social media, has favoured the emergence of a space for democratic expression and new forms of social and political communication.

Social media are subject to a plurality of definitions. Potier and Abiteboul (2019) consider social media as an online service enabling its users to publish the contents of their choice and to make them so accessible to all or part of the others users of this service. Sazanov (2010) argues that social media is a social structure of the Internet whose nodes are constituted by organisations or individuals and whose links represent interactions of political, corporate, service, family and friendship. (Richaud, 2017) confirms that two waves of social media involving various ways of communicating have been created in the space of 10 years. If Facebook and Twitter are social media based on virtual writing and the sharing of textual information, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok and Whatsapp are distinguished by the sharing of photos and short videos. Nevertheless, these media have all developed new communication rites favourable to political parties (Nounkeu, 2022). If the expression of political ideas was previously confined to a private sphere, social media has democratised the expression of the political choices and opinions of different political actors and has reshaped the methods of expression of opposition political parties in certain authoritarian African states (Najer, 2013; Ngono, 2018).

The doctrine remains controversial on a consensual definition of the opposition or what should be considered as opposition or an opposition political party (Burdeau, 1954; Debbasch, 2001; Jan, 2004). It is appropriate to retain the definition according to which the opposition designates the parties or political teams which are against the government and which pose as an alternative force to the regime in place on the basis of a different social programme ready to be defended during elections (Jan, 2004). The functioning of opposition political parties differs according to the nature of the political regime considered. In democratic political regimes (Sadoun, 2004), opposition political parties have a recognised status and freedom of expression (Emmanuel, 2011). This contributes to the enhancement of political competition and the debate of ideas among the various political actors. It is in this sense that the opposition is considered the bedrock of pluralist democracy (Jan, 2004). In autocratic regimes, opposition political parties are tolerated to a limited extent by the political group in power, which does not hesitate to multiply the strategies of engulfing or neutralising opposition parties that develop a radical philosophy with regard to power. In this context, democratic governance remains artificial and a real challenge in authoritarian regimes.

Contextual background

Social media in an African context is marked by authoritarian governance (Ngono, 2018; Temir, 2021). Indeed, the democratic promise consubstantial with the period of democratic transitions in the 1990s has gradually been betrayed by the return of authoritarianism on the continent (Cheeseman and Smith, 2019; Magnani and Virculon, 2019). This authoritarianism is characterised by the restriction of public freedoms and civic space, various pressures on the media, the subjugation of the judiciary to the executive power, the confiscation of media space by the party in power, the violation of rules of democratic alternation, the organisation of non-transparent and fraudulent elections, the neutralisation of counter-powers and the muzzling of opposition political parties (Jaume, 2021). These obstacles to freedom are indicative of a post-authoritarian context marked by a desire for hegemony by the dominant political power. Pommerolle (2008) specifies that post-authoritarians designate a situation in which the legal limitations of pluralism have been removed (end of one party system, freedom of expression, etc.), but where other more informal means of limiting the pluralism, such as violence, remain crucial drivers of political domination. Seen from this angle, most African

states appear as ‘democrature’ (Liniger-Goumaz, 1992): states which affirm officially their commitment to democratic rules, but practice a strong presidential system, a severe restriction of public freedoms and a non-inclusive governance. In this context, opposition political parties are seen as threats to hegemonic political power. When they are tolerated, they are subject to muzzling and many restrictions from the dominant power.

This description of the practice of authoritarianism corresponds well to what is happening in Cameroon and Chad. The choice of these two countries in this study is justified by a set of factors. First, these two countries are located in Central Africa, an area considered by several authors to be the breeding ground for antidemocratic practices (Eboko and Awondo, 2018; Tametong 2021 Tubiana; 2021). Secondly, they are distinguished by an authoritarian democratic governance marked by the restriction of civic space and an unprecedented longevity of the presidents in power (Owona and Menthong 2018, Pigeaud, 2011). In Cameroon, President Paul has been in power for 40 years since 6 November 6 1982, under the banner of his political party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM). Before his death in April 2021, late President Idriss Deby Itno of Chad had been in power from 1990 – 30 years under the banner of his party, Mouvement populaire pour le Salut (MPS) (Idrissa, 2021). He was replaced through a coup perpetrated by his son, Mahamat Idriss Deby, with the support of France (Tubiana, 2021), thus achieving a transmission of power from father to son (Tametong, 2022). Finally, these two countries have more than 300 opposition political parties each. But this large number of parties should not be misleading because, in these countries, the main opposition leaders have gradually been weakened by the ruling party, either by cooptation within the government (Ngayap, 2000) or by violent repression (Karamoko, 2021). But, contrary to Cameroon, the armed opposition is a constant in Chadian political history and an obligatory path for several candidates seeking power through a coup d’etat. This was the case of Hissène Habre, who overthrew President Oueddei by a coup in 1982 before being overthrown by Idriss Deby Itno in 1990. In the context of democratic crisis characterised by a monopolisation of public space by the party in power, and a considerable narrowing of the field of action of opposition political parties (Pommerolle, 2008; Sindjoun, 2003), the advent of social media opens up a window of opportunity and a vital space for

opposition political parties to participate in constructing a democratic society in Cameroon and Chad.

Literature review

If some authors demonstrated that the use of social media has contributed to the decline of liberal democracy in the United States and the emergence of populism in certain countries around the world (Postill, 2018; Schleffer and Miller, 2021; Vaidhyanathan, 2019), most studies confirm that the use of social media by opposition political parties in authoritarian countries contributes to democratic governance (Sidi and Fewou, 2015). In fact, opposition political parties operating in autocratic contexts look for different ways in which they can communicate, organise and mobilise their members. For example, Temir (2021) has demonstrated that social media in Russia remains the only expression space of the opposition that is still tolerated by the ruling party. Social media played an important role in organising social protests following President Putin's announcement of his candidacy for the 2012 presidential election. Ryabovolola (2017: 123) argues that 'social media gave the protesters a unique opportunity to connect with each other to articulate and discuss their ideas, particularly since the protests were spontaneous and decentralised and did not have clearly defined goals'. Along the same lines, Dollbaum (2021) also demonstrated how opposition political actors have made use of Twitter and VKontakte, Russia's leading social network, to oppose pension reform. The author describes precisely how Aleksey Navalny and the Communist Party (KPRF) politicised grievances about the pension reform of 2018 and used Twitter and VKontakte for protest mobilisation. He demonstrated that Navalny integrated the reform in his narrative of government corruption and theft, strategically using different advantages of these platforms'.

African authors have also enriched the literature on the use of social media in authoritarian regimes characterised by the locking of media space. Social media has been invested in by the political field as a tool for destabilising authoritarian regimes. It appears that social media played a stimulating and decisive role in the popular uprisings that led to the dismantling of dictatorial regimes in North Africa from 2010 (Faris, 2012; Morin, 2017). In the same vein,

Mbow (2019) demonstrated the influence of the digital factor and social media in the reversal in 2016 of Yahya's Jammeh dictatorial regime which ruled Gambia with an iron fist for more than two decades. Under the impetus of the Gambian diaspora, various social media have served as receptacles for protest discourse long inhibited by a dictatorial and repressive power. In a recent study, Kwayu (2022) conducted a comparative analysis on the determinants of the strategy of opposition political parties on social media in Tanzania. He started by observing that the state had imposed repressive political restrictions against opposition parties. Thus, opposition political parties turned to social media as an alternative means to mobilise and communicate because of restrictions in traditional spaces, such as mainstream media and rallies. Beyond the political aspect, Ngono (2018) demonstrated that social media constitutes the new space for popular mobilisation of social causes in Cameroon. Taking the case of 'Eva', a young girl of four years who disappeared in obscure conditions in 2015, it demonstrates how many Cameroonians have invested in Facebook to denounce and be indignant at what they characterised as ritual crimes. Thus, Cameroonian cyberspace appears to be a place conducive to collective mobilisation and the symbolic commitment of individuals in a country where the power in place continues to maintain a grip on the media and political field.

By focusing on Cameroon and Chad, this study expands on the existing literature on the use of social media by opposition political parties (Heungoup and Tanda, 2019). In these countries, new opposition actors have appeared on the political scene by articulating their communication strategies through the main forms of social media.

Problem statement and hypothesis

If social media is subject to a legal framework in Cameroon[1] and Chad[2], it should be noted that the Internet penetration rate differs in these two countries. The Internet penetration rate in Cameroon is around 36.5% for a population estimated at 28 million inhabitants (Hootsuite and We are Social report, 2022[3]). In Chad, it is around 14.2%, that is, 2 310 332 Internet users out of 8 696 859 telecoms subscribers (Agence de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et des Postes, 2020 report[4]). In these two countries with

obvious autocratic tendencies, it seems judicious to build the study around this main research question: Has the emergence of social media and their use by opposition political parties contributed to reshaping the democratic governance in authoritarianist countries such as Cameroon and Chad?

RQ 1: How is social media perceived and used by opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad?

RQ 2: Does social media play a role in the organisation of collective mobilisations against the established regimes in Cameroon and Chad?

RQ3: Are the authoritarian regimes in Cameroon and Chad seeing the emergence of social media as a threat or an opportunity?

The main hypothesis of this study is as follows: Despite the multiplication of strategies to limit the impact of social media by the authoritarian regimes established in Cameroon and Chad, it appears that social media have contributed to opening a more democratic space and redefining the modalities of action of opposition political parties.

H1: Social media is perceived and used by opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad as a new political communication tool.

H2: Social media catalyses collective mobilisations organised by opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad.

H3: Social media is perceived as a threat by authoritarian regimes established in Cameroon and Chad.

Methodology approach

Theoretical and analysis framework

From a theoretical approach, this study is built on the theory of new mobilisation via the use of the Internet (Hirzalla, 2010). This theory demonstrates that the Internet and social media constitute, for political actors, new tools for mobilising and inciting the participation of social groups and categories of individual otherwise indifferent to politics (Wojcik, 2011). These new

forms of numerical mobilisation, in some cases, go beyond the virtual threshold into reality by a commitment of the masses (Almeida, 2017; Racine, 2010) to participate in the electoral game or the protest mobilisation against the excesses of democratic governance of the dominant party. As a place of democratic free expression (Trippi 2008), social media are taken over by political opposition actors, not only as a new means of political communication (Ngange and Elonge 2019) capable of driving change (Cabedoche, 2017; Soriano, 2013) but also as a strategic field of action (Crozier and Ehrard, 1977) whose control assures visibility and contributes to a political or social legitimacy of the opposition political actors carrying a protest discourse against the dominant political order. The dynamics at work in social media are analysed in this study through the prism of strategic and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1988).

Case selection and data collection

Case selection

The study is empirical and qualitative. In Cameroon, the two political parties on which the study focuses are: The Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM), whose leader is Maurice Kamto, and the Parti Camerounais de la Reconciliation Nationale (PCRN), whose leadership is provided by Cabral Libii. The CRM was created on 22 June 22 2012 while the PCRN was created on 14 February 2003. The leadership of this party was taken over and revitalised in 2020 by Cabral Libii who is now a member of the National Assembly.

The choice of these two political parties is justified by two factors: first, their presence on social media and, second, their ranking at the last presidential election of 2018. They were respectively ranked second and third with 14% for the CRM and 6% for the PCRN.

In Chad, the study mainly focuses on the 'Les Transformateurs Party', whose leadership is provided by Succès Masra. Originally appearing on the Chadian political scene in 2018 as a movement, it was recognised as a political party on 8 June 2021 by the Ministry of Administration and Decentralisation. In a country long dominated by the ruling party and the

neutralisation of the opposition, the Transformateurs Party clearly positions itself as an alternative force to the dominant order. Although it has not yet taken part in an election, this party remains distinguished by a real presence on social media. The study also focuses on the coordination of citizen actions called 'Wakit Tamma' which means, in local Arabic in Chad, 'the time has come'. This is a movement made up of more than thirty opposition parties and civil society organisations formed in 2021.

Data collection

Interviews with some members of opposition political parties were conducted. Because the study was intended to be empirical, it is based on the collection of data and digital content resulting from the careful analysis of the various pages of political parties and accounts associated with party figures or claiming an ideological proximity to the party on social media (Millette, 2020). This material was supplemented by documentary exploitation and observation.

This study analyses the interaction of opposition political parties on Facebook because it appears that, despite their presence on other types of social media, the main social network used by opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad is Facebook. Atenga (2005: 19) argued that this social network is similar 'to a free forum where one comes to pour out, take a position, scrap with the others on various topics. It contributes to the emergence of new ways of speaking public, promotes emancipation and the enhancement of singularities in a more open, more direct, more participative …'. According to Fatema et al. (2022), Facebook declaresd almost 2.8 billion active users monthly (Facebook Reports First Quarter 2022 Results, 2022[5]) in 2020 and was listed as the fourth most-used global Internet service.

Results demonstration

H1: Social media is perceived and used by opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad as a new political communication tool

The emergence of social media in Cameroon and Chad has renewed the modalities of political communication for political parties (Ngange and Elonge, 2019). The opposition political parties considered social media as an opportunity and a new channel for political communication in a media space almost monopolised by the party in power. In Cameroon, the media space has long been monopolised by the State main public media: Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) for television and radio, on the one hand, and the daily Cameroon Tribune and its derivatives for the written press, on the other hand. With the adoption of the 1990 law on social communication and its subsequent amendments, the media landscape has diversified to the point where, alongside the public media, there are nearly 40 television channels, 110 private radio stations, 60 newspapers and 40 online media. But this quantitative diversification of the media space should not be misleading because it does not take into account the level of freedom of expression of media in this country. Most of the broadcast media and print newspapers are created by members of the ruling party who use nominees or people with proven loyalty for the purposes of the cause (Verville, 2012). Moreover, the power in place exercises a repressive and authoritarian control over the media space, and particularly against the private media which refuses to play the game of the elite in power (Atenga, 2005). For example, journalists and the private television Équinoxe are the subject of permanent harassment and repression by the power in place because this channel gives the floor to opposition political parties and, in this case, the CRM. Recently, one of its militants had been arbitrarily banned by the Minister of Territorial Administration from participating in a public debate on this television channel[6]. It therefore shows that the Cameroonian media space is essentially squared by the media at the profit of the power in place and which conveys the ideology of that party. The director general of CRTV also stated that the main public media was the 'head of state's drum'[7]: he could use it for the purposes of political communication and propaganda. Only the opposition political parties which had made an alliance with the party in power within the framework of the presidential majority are invited to the public media. The PRCN is only invited occasionally and the CRM, considered the most radical opposition political party, is never invited. This proves how much speaking

out as an opponent in the Cameroonian public space still constitutes a current risk (Owono Zambo, 2016).

The configuration of the Chadian media space is not fundamentally different from the Cameroonian media space; the only difference is that it has fewer media than Cameroon. Indeed, the Chadian media landscape has long been monopolised. The monopoly was ensured by the National Office of Radio and Television (ONRT) and resulted in a fairly general submission of national radio and television programmes to the supervision of the politico-administrative power (Dargent, 2010) controlled by the MPS, the main ruling party. This monopoly will gradually yield to the test of the liberalisation of the media space and the creation of numerous private media (Abdoulaye and Abdelkerim, 2015). Today, the Chadian media landscape includes nearly 100 audio-visual media and private radio stations, about 30 print newspaper titles and 6 online media[8]. Despite the diversity, the Chadian public space has remained under the regulated control of the political power in place.

This restriction of media space has led to disuse of traditional communication media by the Cameroonian and Chadian populations. The people interviewed for this study revealed that social networks, and Facebook in this case, are their main channels of information. Excluded from speaking out in the public media, repressed in the private media and aware of the social impact of social media, the main opposition parties have adapted their communication to the trend of social media by multiplying Facebook pages (Beaufort, 2018). It appears from the digital traces collected on the Facebook social network that, in Cameroon, the CRM has nearly 90 Facebook pages and associated accounts with an average of 20 000 subscribers per page. These pages were all created between 2012, when the party was created, and 2019. The creation of these pages experienced a particular peak between 2017 and 2018. The year 2018 was marked by the organisation of the presidential election and the CRM took part in it for the first time. As for the PCRN, it has about 75 Facebook pages and associated accounts with an average of 3 000 followers per page. The peak of the creation of these pages occurred between 2018, the year of the presidential election, and 2020, the year of the parliamentary elections.

In Chad, the opposition Transformers political party has nearly 170 Facebook pages and associated accounts. The party's main page has 141 000 followers. The certified page of the leader of this party, Succès Masra, counts near to 224 000 subscribers. All of these pages were mainly created between 2020 and 2021, the period of official recognition of the party. The coordination of civil society movements and opposition parties, Wakit Tamma, has a Facebook page called Wakit Tamma_officiel created on 6 December 2021. This page has 449 followers. Another Facebook page called, Wakit Tamma official with some writings in Arabic, was created on 14 May 2021 and has 17 000 followers. Many other groups associated with this movement have also been identified and comprise an average of ten subscribers.

Jean-Paul Lafrance (2013), as quoted by Badau and Eyries (2015), affirms that the main interest of opposition political parties in social media comes from the fact that they promote interactivity, rapid reaction, are often epidermal and involve gathering around hot events to share. Through the grip they exert on the main social network Facebook, these opposition political parties manage to circumvent the restrictions of traditional media space to convey their ideology and their political programme. This was particularly observed during the electoral campaign for the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon (Stier, 2018). The CRM and the PRCN used the social network Facebook to highlight their political programme and their social project, communicate about the activities of the party, stage the candidates invested by the party and broadcast the meetings they had organised. The PCRN has even used this social network to raise campaign funds to pay the caution of its presidential candidate in 2018, Cabral Libii. Through the possibility it offers to carry out lives, Facebook is now used as a platform par excellence by the leaders of the CRM and the PCRN for the dissemination of end-of-year greeting messages to the Cameroonian populations and, at the same time, to broadcast the traditional message of the President of the Republic to the nation. In this exercise, the message of the opposition political leaders benefits from a wider audience than the one of the Head of State. In Chad, Facebook is used by the Transformers party to publicise its leader's movements, his speeches on national event and to communicate key messages to its militants.

Political actors have therefore invested in the sphere of digital social media, and particularly Facebook, in order to extend their influence and facilitate the possibilities of reaching their electorate (Badau and Eyries, 2015; Onuch, 2015). This occupation of digital space by these opposition political parties has made it possible to compensate for the imbalance in time on the traditional media, mainly controlled by the ruling party. The data from the questionnaire administered for the purposes of this study reveal unanimity among the participants on the idea that the control of social media, and precisely Facebook, has become a key issue for the opposition actors in Cameroon and Chad, insofar as they promote mass interpersonal communication and alter the boundaries of traditional public spaces.

H2: Social media catalyses collective mobilisations organised by opposition political parties in Cameroon and Chad

According to Faris (2011), social media is extremely present today, including in developing countries, and it is now difficult to imagine that social mobilisation could take place without social media. In other words, social media contributes to and facilitates the organisation of collective mobilisations of a social or political nature and encourages the political participation of the popular masses (Hirzalla, 2011). Pechenkina (2016) demonstrated that social networks have significantly contributed to the mobilisation of young people during election campaigns in France and Russia. Although this mobilisation has, in some cases, only a symbolic value limited to the virtual space (Ngono, 2018; Sidi and Fewou, 2015), it sometimes results in the physical and conscious commitment of citizens in the real public space through political protestations.

We were able to observe the enthusiasm of the popular masses during the electoral campaign for the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon. The mobilisation observed during campaign rallies was far superior to that observed during the 2011 or 2004 presidential elections. In fact, the vitality of social media, that is, their ability to promote rapid and unpredictable dissemination of rallying messages has significantly contributed to the mobilisation of voters by opposition political parties (Pons and McIntire, 2020). It is through calls for mobilisation relayed through the social network Facebook that Cabral Libii of the PCRN, a novice in the

political arena, organised giant meetings with massive participation from the population[9]. Similarly with the CRM candidate, Maurice Kamto, whose meetings were particularly popular in all the cities of Cameroon due to the amplification of calls for mobilisation through the Facebook pages and groups associated with his political party[9]. Most of the people interviewed for this study said they had taken part for the first time in an election campaign rally by following the calls for mobilisation from these political leaders relayed on Facebook on the pages and groups associated with their political parties. It was also the first time they had participated in the ballot and had monitored their vote by attending the counting of the ballot boxes, in accordance with the instructions given by the leaders of the CRM and the PCRN through social media.

Dollbaum (2012) demonstrated that social networks play an important and decisive role in organising and mobilising resistance in autocratic regimes. The day after the proclamation of the results of the 2018 presidential election, the CRM initiated a national resistance plan to denounce what the party and his leader considered as an electoral 'Hold Up'. Accusing President Paul Biya of the CPDM of having stolen his victory, Maurice Kamto invited Cameroonians to mobilise through peaceful demonstration and express their discontent in the street. This call for mobilisation through Facebook was considered by the ruling party as a real defiance because any demand for the occupation of public protestations is systematically prohibited and repressed by the dominant power in place (Tametong, 2021). Despite the prohibition of these protestations by the regime in place, the call for mobilisation in the street launched by the CRM found a favourable echo among activists, thanks to the action of social networks. Several protesters were arrested in January 2009 throughout the country and most were imprisoned with the leader of the party, his board and his allies. Nine months after intense negotiations and pressure, the President of the Republic ordered the cessation of the proceedings against them[10]. Several other calls for mobilisation in the street launched by this political party experienced an equal enthusiasm from the population and an even fiercer repression by the regime in place. In the diaspora, calls for popular mobilisation in major Western capitals experienced unprecedented repercussions (Djoufan, 2021, Tchingankong, 2019).

In Chad, Succès Masra's Transformers party and the Wakit Tamma coalition ensured defiance and resistance to the regime in place through permanent calls for peaceful mobilisations in the streets. These calls were widely relayed on Facebook. Three cycles of collective mobilisation were convened for illustrative purposes. In fact, following the announcement of Idriss Deby's presidential candidacy for a 6th term presidential in 2021, the Transformers party and Wakit Tamma launched a slogan of peaceful demonstration for 6 February 2021, called 'the march of the people', in order to denounce the candidacy of the outgoing president, the inequity of the electoral system and to express their dissatisfaction with social injustice. This popular mobilisation in the capital and the cities of the country gave rise to repressions and arrests of the militants by the power in place[11]. A second cycle of collective mobilisation was organised in the wake of the opening of the national dialogue on 20 August 2022, which the Transformers party refused to take part in. In parallel, the leader of the party, Succès Masra, launched a slogan of resistance for 60 days for justice and equality, on the one hand, and he organised the 'dialogue of the people' around calls for collective mobilisation at headquarters of the party, on the other hand. The echo of this call for mobilisation was relayed on the Facebook pages and groups associated with the party. By analysing, for example, the certified Facebook page of Succès Masra, we noted that, between 20 August and 3 September 03 2022, there were about 30 publications, an average of two publications per day, in connection with the call for collective mobilisation at the Balcony of Hope, headquarters of the party. This was besieged by the police who carried out a violent dispersal of the crowds and arrested several other protesters. The announcement on Facebook of the convocation on 9 September 2022 of Succès Masra by the Prosecutor gave rise to new spontaneous popular mobilisations once again repressed by the army. The third cycle of popular mobilisation took place on 20 October 2022 to protest against the extension of Mahamat Idriss Deby's mandate at the head of the Chadian transition. The call for mobilisation was launched on the Wakit Tamma official website on 19 October[12]. This mobilisation resulted in the killing of several protestations[13].

Outside of the political field, calls for collective mobilisation by opposition political parties can manifest themselves not through popular involvement in the street, but through the call for expression of solidarity around a specific cause. These are calls for mobilisation of a symbolic

nature (Bourdieu, 1992). This was the case in Cameroon at the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic. Surfing on its popular legitimacy and its base on social networks, the CRM launched the Survie Cameroun Survival Initiative (SCSI). The initiative was about fundraising to provide Cameroonian populations with the means to protect against the spread of Covid-19. This operation had a great impact with the mobilisation of several million euros[14].

H3: Social media is perceived as a threat by authoritarian regimes established in Cameroon and Chad

As privileged vectors of freedom of democratic expression and catalysts of social mobilisations, social networks are emerging as new spaces for emancipation, contestation and the construction of politics. Richaud (2017) argues that social media has profoundly changed democratic governance by redefining the relationship between rulers and ruled. Social media is thus part of the paradigm of the recomposition of powers (Arsène, 2013), counter-power or even counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006). Because it concedes a democratisation of the word, contributes to the political awareness of the populations and facilitates the organisation of collective mobilisations, the authoritarian regimes of Cameroon and Chad develop a certain aversion to social media. To limit the impact of their use by opposition political parties, they multiply counter-offensive strategies.

The first strategy consists of investing in the field of social media to convey a counter-discourse to that of the opposition. This is why control of Cameroonian and Chadian cyberspace is a vital issue for the ruling party and its allies. In Cameroon, for example, a page certified in the name of Paul Biya was created on Facebook on 3 September 2018, a week before the start of the electoral campaign for the presidential election. The page has about 54 000 subscribers. An official page of the presidential party of the CPDM already existed from September 2014. It has 9900 subscribers. Aware of the popular disaffection of the policy it pursues and the attraction of the Cameroonian populations to the pages and groups of the opposition political parties, the party in power, in its approach to control the social network Facebook, has developed a strategy to rally the support of public figures with a large audience on social networks. The party also created Facebook groups advocating the party's ideology

and they set up a ‘cybernetic brigade’ (Fouté, 2020) made up of fake profile accounts that systematically responded to opposition discourse. This offensive by the ruling party was particularly observed during the 2018 election period. With two Facebook accounts draining 30 000 and 17 000 followers respectively, a well-known media figure such as Mathias-Éric Owona Nguini, an academic close to the regime, during and after the election campaign at the rate of three publications on average per day, levelled harsh criticism against Maurice Kamto of the CRM, the main figure in view of the opposition. Similarly, the Minister Delegate for Justice, Jean de Dieu Momo, a former opponent, also got involved on his Facebook page ‘Fo'o Dzakeutonpoug [15]’ with 49 900 followers, in virulent responses and attacks against CRM activists and its leader. The logic of the confrontation of the groups was also observed between the pro-opposition group ‘Le Cameroun C'est le Cameroun’ (nearly 300 000 followers before it was removed) and the pro-party groups in power such as ‘Le Cameroun est formidable vivons seulement’ (nearly 91 000 followers) and ‘Parle Que Beti’ (164 000 followers). This led to the tribalisation of the Cameroonian political scene against the backdrop of ethno-political discourse which threatened Cameroonians living together (Arrey, 2021). In Chad, the strategy consisted of enlisting one of the great figures of the Chadian opposition within the government, so the presence of and the capacity for mobilisation through social networks was remarkable. With a Facebook account followed by 56 000 members, Saleh Kebzabo, the new Chadian Prime Minister, became the destroyer of the peaceful marches of the opposition, despite having been the main instigator for several years[16]. The choice of this former opponent is simply part of the logic of weakening the Chadian opposition in its capacity to mobilise.

The second strategy consists of resorting to insidious techniques of cloning, inhibition, hacking, and reporting the Facebook or Twitter accounts of certain activists or opponents (Heungoup and Tanda, 2019). It is not surprising that the largest Facebook group opposed to the Yaoundé regime called ‘Le Cameroun C'est le Cameroun’ (LCCLC) was deleted after a Facebook team visited Cameroon at the invitation of the Cameroonian government. Officially, this team had been invited to help the Cameroonian government fight against the rise of fake news. But this invitation was unofficially dictated by the will of the Cameroonian government to regulate through censorship the free expression of political opinions on Facebook.

Moreover, the promoter of this group declared to have been notified by Facebook of the temporary closure of its forum at the request of the Cameroonian government[17]. In the same wake, the accounts of pro-opposition activists such Boris Bertold and N'zui Manta were closed by Facebook. When it does not close accounts, Facebook proceeds to restrict the scope of social impact of the pages of activists and political actors of the opposition. Heungoup and Tandan (2019) claim that since 2017, the Cameroonian regime has set up a task force, piloted from the presidency of the Republic, to report the accounts of political activists and dissidents. Similarly, 'influencers', or people who have a strong community of members on social networks, have been recruited to carry out the regime's propaganda. According to the same authors, the government solicited a private Russian company to publish content on social media that was favourable to the government and unfavourable to opposition leaders (2019:16).

The third strategy consists of slowing down the Internet connection or permanently cutting off Internet access for populations. In 2016, the regime of President Idriss Deby blocked Internet access and SMS communications during the presidential election (Meister, 2017). In 2018, he reoffended by censoring Internet and social networks throughout the country from March 2018 to June 2019. This radical option of Internet censorship and censored access to social networks was also applied by the Cameroonian government to the regions of the North-West and South-West in crisis between January and May 2017. For the government, this censorship was justified by the need to preserve public order after the dissemination of 'fake news' by English-speaking activists established in the diaspora and who financed the secessionist movement.

Conclusion

If the coming of social media and their use by opposition forces has led to the overthrow of autocratic regimes in several countries, this is not yet the case in Cameroon and Chad, both of which are characterised by authoritarian governance. It is obvious that social media, and the Facebook social network specifically, has contributed to the liberalisation and democratisation of the media space entirely controlled by the powers in place. Similarly,

social media has contributed significantly, under the impetus of opposition, to strengthening the political participation of social categories in the political field. Above all, they served as catalysts for the organisation and structuring of social mobilisations of protest against the established authoritarian regimes. The opposition political parties are struggling to retain a presence on the Internet and social networks, to ensure a certain visibility, bypass the traditional communication media and mobilise activists. In response, the regimes in Cameroon and Chad have developed strategies of resilience and neutralisation of the impact of the use of social networks by opposition political parties. Beyond the criticisms often linked to the fact that social networks have consecrated a freedom that is dangerous, even harmful to other freedoms, the observation that emerges from this study is that, through their interconnectivity and their speed, social networks are effective weapons in raising awareness among the masses; they are catalysts of political change and social transformation, the judicious use of which by opposition political parties could cause Cameroon and Chad to shift to the modernity of democratic governance.

Notes

1. Loi n° 2010/013 du 21 décembre 2010 régissant les communications électroniques modifiée par la loi n°2015/006 du 20 avril 2015.
2. Loi n° 2014 du 21 mars 2014 portant sur les communications électroniques
3. https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2022/01/digital-2022-another-year-of-bumper-growth-2/
4. https://paradigmhq.org/report/londa-droits-numeriques-et-inclusion-au-cameroun-2020-rapport/?lang=fr
5. https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2022/Meta-Reports-First-Quarter-2022-Results/default.aspx
6. https://www.journalducameroun.com/cameroun-paul-atanga-nji-ordonne-de-faire-sanctionner-un-journalist-et-son-invite/(accessed on November 16, 2022)
7. https://www.camerounweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/La-CRTV-est-le-Tam-Tam-de-Biya-Charles-Ndongo-388488(accessed on November 16, 2022)
8. https://hamatchad.org/le-paysage-media tchadien/#:~:text=On%20d%C3%A9nombre%20%3A%207%20weekly%20%3B1,1%20bimonthly%20and%201%20trimonthly&text=The%20Chad%20only%20counts%20,who%20fight%20over%20the%20landscape(accessed on November 14, 2022)
9. https://237actu.com/cameroun-presidentielle-2018-le-candidat-cabral-libii-enflamme-la-foule-lors-de-son-mega-meeting-a-douala(accessed on November 16, 2022)
10. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20181001-presidentielle-cameroun-le-candidat-maurice-kamto-meeting-yaoundé(accessed on November 15, 2022)
11. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/838966/politique/cameroun-lopponent-maurice-kamto-a-ete-libere-apres-dintenses-negotiations-avec-le-regime-de-paul-biya/(accessed on November 16, 2022)
12. The treasurer of the share will be arrested and Succès Masra, president of the Les Transformateurs party, forced to take refuge in the United States Embassy in Chad.

https://www.voice4thought.org/fr/interdiction-de-manifestation-au-tchad-la-routine-du-pouvoir/(accessed on November 16, 2022

13. The terms of this call for mobilisation are as follows: *"Dear compatriots, Wakit Tamma asks us to go out tomorrow at 6:30 a.m. to the various corners to demand justice. Your freedom will be born of your courage. See you tomorrow. Done on 19/102022. Porte talks about Wakit Tamma".*

14. https://www.hrw.org/en/news/2022/10/26/chad-many-demonstrators-killed-and-injured (accessed on November 16, 2022).

15. https://ecomatin.net/linitiative-survie-cameroon-annonce-avoir-leve-721-millions-au-22-aout-2020/ (accessed on November 16, 2022).

16. He claimed the day after the bloody marches of October 20 that it was not about the marches, but "an insurrection to seize power by force". https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article116812 (accessed on November 16, 2022).

17. https://actucameroun.com/2020/07/29/cameroun-facebook-supprime-le-groupe-le-cameroun-cest-le-cameroun/ . He noted that this forum followed by more than 300,000 followers had definitely been closed before being recreated. He currently has less than 30,000 subscribers.

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