

SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

**CAMEROON ELECTION  
AND  
COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA**



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**CULTURE-E**  
DIGITAL MEDIA

# INDEX

I. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT.....	1
II. THE PUBLIC DISCUSSION ECOSYSTEM AND OFFICIAL SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS.....	2
III. ANOMALOUS TWITTER ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING PRESIDENT BIYA.....	5
IV. A COORDINATED AND COHERENT ACTIVITY.....	6
V. FROM QUANTITATIVE TO QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND BACK.....	9
VI. AN EXAMPLE OF COORDINATED ACTION: RED TIME IN ACTION.....	12
VII. ARE WE REALLY DEALING WITH AN ORGANIZED TEAM?.....	13
VIII. GREEN AND YELLOW TEAM.....	14
IX. COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA AND SUBSAHARIAN AFRICA....	17

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Last October presidential elections were among the most tense in Cameroon's recent history. In fact, in a country crossed by a deep social and political discontent with the ruling class and scared by the armed rebellion of the English-speaking minority of the West, the outgoing President Paul Biya, in power for over thirty years, has reconfirmed his leadership of the government, easily overcoming his opponents.

The electoral campaign, particularly felt by Cameroonians and characterized by harsh tones, was also significantly fought on social networks, reflecting the growing importance of the net in the political dynamics of African societies.

The analysis of the public discussion ecosystem allowed to understand how President Biya and his two main adversaries, Maurice Kamto and Joshua Osih, have invested important resources in online campaign that saw the presence of some low blows and suspicious behaviours.

The case of Cameroon comes about a year after the Kenyan elections, also characterized by unscrupulous use of social media, and allows to confirm how the African continent sees clearly a growing of the centrality of social networks in the definition of social, political and economic balances of the different countries.



## I. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The presidential elections held the 7<sup>th</sup> October have been among the most tense in Cameroon's recent history, due to the precarious situation of internal security, threatened by the rebellion of the English-speaking population living in the Western part of the country and by the growing protests against the incumbent President Paul Biya, in power since over 30 years and accused of being the head of a corrupt, self-referential and patronal system. Competing for Biya's presidential seat were Maurice Kamto, long serving politician, and Joshua Osih, a young entrepreneur considered by many local observers as the future opposition's leader.

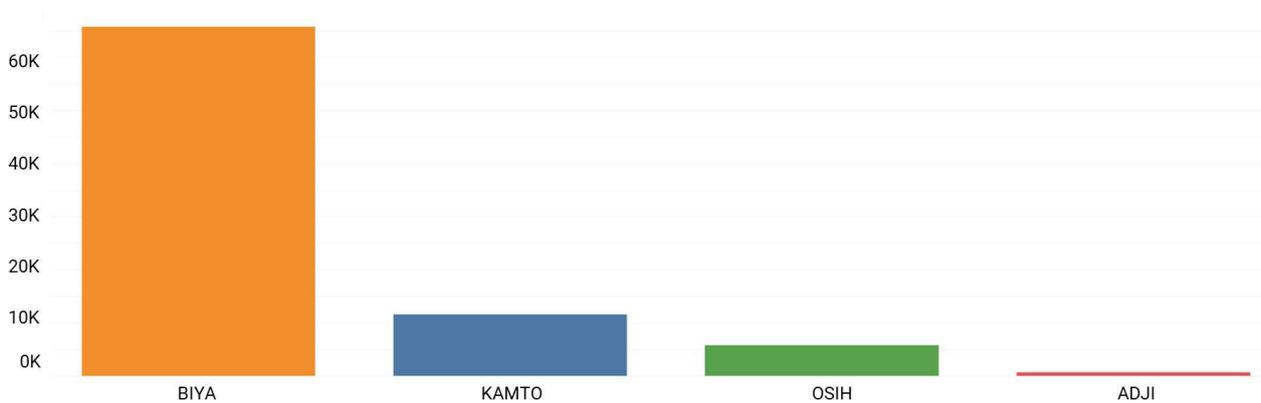
The separatism of the English-speaking population, a huge minority of about 8 million people (a third of the whole country), dates back to Cameroon's independence and the merging of old English and French colonies. In the last 5 years, the phenomenon resurfaced more vigorously through a massive social mobilization and harsher conflicts with national authorities.

The electoral campaign, marked by the violent repression of both English-speaking independence movements (Ambazonia Liberation Front, Southern Cameroons National Council, Ambazonia Defense Forces) and oppositions' rallies, has been fought harshly also online, in a country where the 18% of the population has access to internet (especially in Douala, Yaoundé and Bameda) and where the slow growth of a modern middle class is destined to change the national mechanisms of political and social participation. In this context Biya's victory, stained by suspected irregularities and rejected by some oppositions' members, could spark more crisis fires around the country.

## II. THE PUBLIC DISCUSSION ECOSYSTEM AND OFFICIAL SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

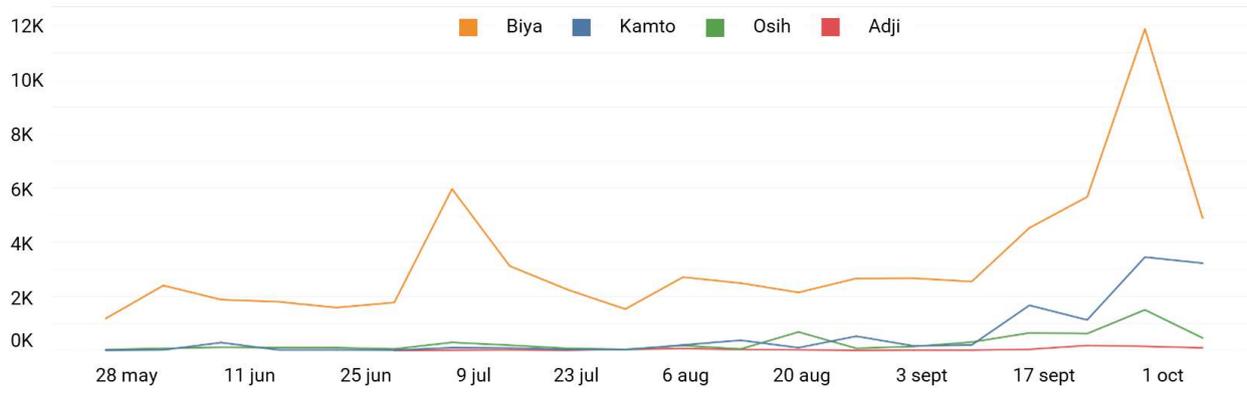
Online conversations relative to the Cameroon’s presidential elections of 2018 have been monitored on a global level on Social networks, Blogs and websites. Per each candidate have been analysed specific keywords and the official Twitter and Facebook accounts. Quotes for President Biya exceed the ones of competitors Kamto and Osih in the period under scrutiny (May – October 2018, table 1 and 2). Biya’s primacy in the number of registered quotes is influenced also by online discussion regarding how the government handled tensions with the English-speaking territory in the South (Ambazonias). More specifically, in the last 2 years, in Cameroon we witnessed to a growth of independence protest of the English-speaking population in the south-western regions. Leading the anti-establishment front there are several organizations (Ambazonia Liberation Front, Southern Cameroons National Council, Ambazonia Defense Forces), whose non-violent initiatives have been brutally repressed by Cameroon’s Armed Forces. Human rights violations and the abuses carried on by central authorities (destruction of villages, unlawful arrests, censorship) led some NGOs (Amnesty International) to call out for undeclared internal conflict, if not for genocide altogether.

**Cameroon election: mention volume**



**Table 1** Comparison of keyword quotes relative to the four monitored candidates

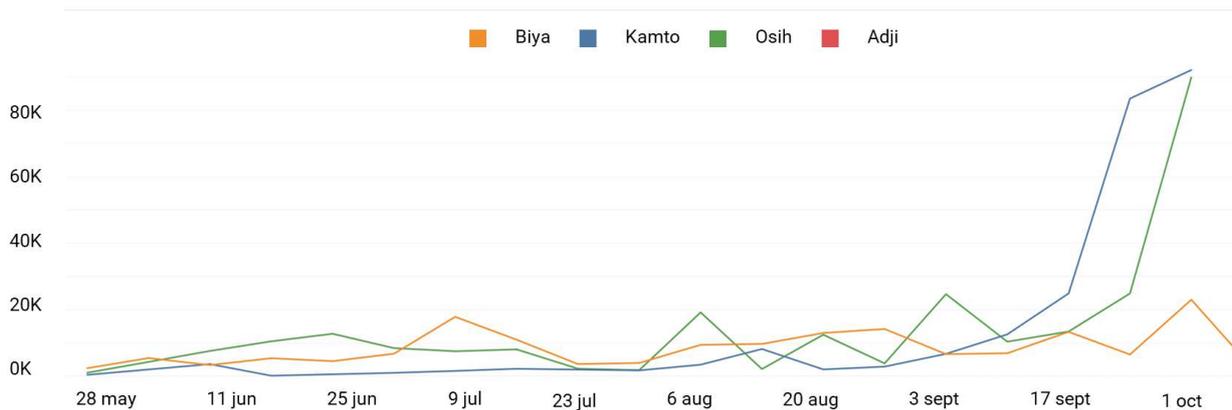
**Cameroon election: mention trends**



**Table 2** Keyword quotation trend relative to the four monitored candidates

Noticeably, analysing the owned social channels (Facebook and Twitter) the situation appears completely different (Table 3).

**Cameroon election: owned media trends**



**Table 3** Trend of registered interaction between social accounts of three candidates: Biya, Osih, Kamto

From September onward Kamto and Osih registered the best performances, with Kamto leading by number of interactions gathered. Maurice Kamto, leader of the opposition party MRC (Mouvement pour la renaissance du Cameroun) has a long political career, crowned by the appointments as Deputy Prime Minister, Justice Minister and Cameroon representative to the International Court of Justice in the litigation against Nigeria regarding the sovereignty of Bekassi peninsula. The moderate popular support he can muster and the efficacy of his campaign on the rise of national democratic standards gave him a 14% of ballots. Joshua Osih, the FSD (Front Social-Démocratique) leader and well-renown businessman, has been the first English-speaking citizen to be elected in the Douala district. Staunch



supporter of the fight against corruption and favourable to a renewal of the national political establishment, gathered 3% of the ballots, preparing to become the face of Biya's opposition front new generation.

The three leaders have been very active on Social Network, employing different communication strategies. Osih built his online campaign accurately using the platform Quorum ([www.quorum.com](http://www.quorum.com)). The service, created by a French start-up, provides all the necessary components to spread online one's political campaign and opinion. Osih therefore organized a full online presence: an official website (with sections dedicated to fundraising and volunteer gathering), a downloadable app, official social network channels. Kamto's success pointed out in Table 3 is bound to the success of live streaming videos on Facebook, published on the official profile and then shared by other official and unofficial pages at regional level. It is a tool meant to engage one's public directly: the videos show likes, comments, sharing and views. The content that registered the higher number of interactions among the ones analysed for the three candidates official social accounts is a Facebook live published the 6<sup>th</sup> of October by Maurice Kamto through his Facebook page: more than 20k comments, 7.4k likes, 6.8 shares and 175k views.



### III. ANOMALOUS TWITTER ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING PRESIDENT BIYA

Through the analysis of the observed Twitter messages relative to President Biya, some anomalies tend to appear. Clusters of Twitter users during the electoral campaign, seem to engage in discussion in the micro-blogging platform in a coordinated fashion, coordinating both in intentions and contents defending the President. Through the analysis of those actions it is possible to identify a double activity: diffusion of contents favourable to Paul Biya and *astrosurfing* actions, which target is an organized diffusion of information meant to make those info appear as they were spontaneously shared by normal users. Such operations could support President Biya in 2 different area, one in internal politics and the other on the international level. Precisely, under the domestic profile Biya, living a consensus crisis due to the high level of corruption and patronization that characterise his power system and criticized for the excessively muscular reaction to neutralize the claims of Ambazonia independents, could be eased by a large online movement of backers. Conversely, under the international profile, Cameroon President could benefit from a solid online consent, that could help in reassuring his African and European partners (mostly France), worried about the possible spreading of instability stemming from Yaoundé to the whole west Africa region.

The study concerning how these accounts act lead to the hypothesis of a small number of operators engaged in the centralized management of more Twitter accounts. The accounts, here isolated explicatively and not exhaustively, published 4% of the analysed tweets.

## IV. A COORDINATED AND COHERENT ACTIVITY

The dataset built by the tweets containing the keywords selected for Paul Biya has been analysed searching for anomalies in content distribution or account activities. Some anomalies appeared in the activity of some Twitter accounts, showed in Tables 4, 5, 6.

Twitter mentions



**Table 4** visual representation of Twitter account's activity

Twitter mentions



Table 5 visual representation of Twitter account's activity

Twitter mentions

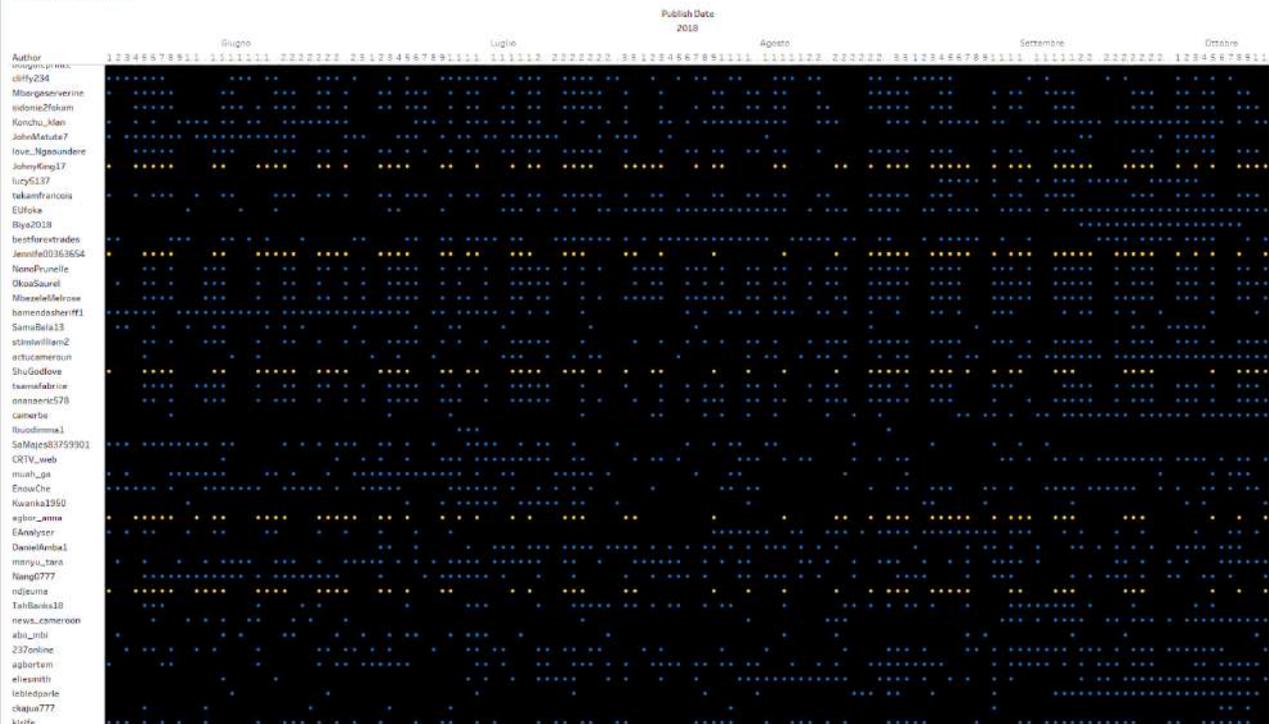


Table 6 visual representation of Twitter account's activity



Graphs 4, 5, 6 show the distribution of some users' Twitter activities in discussion regarding President Biya. In the left columns of the graph are listed the authors, in the top the months and days under scrutiny. Every dot shows the activity of a user in a certain day. Red, green and yellow dots show the behaviour of certain authors, twitting constantly in the same days. The dataset, with a non-exhaustive analysis, showed at least 17 accounts with a similar anomalous activity.

## V. FROM QUANTITATIVE TO QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND BACK

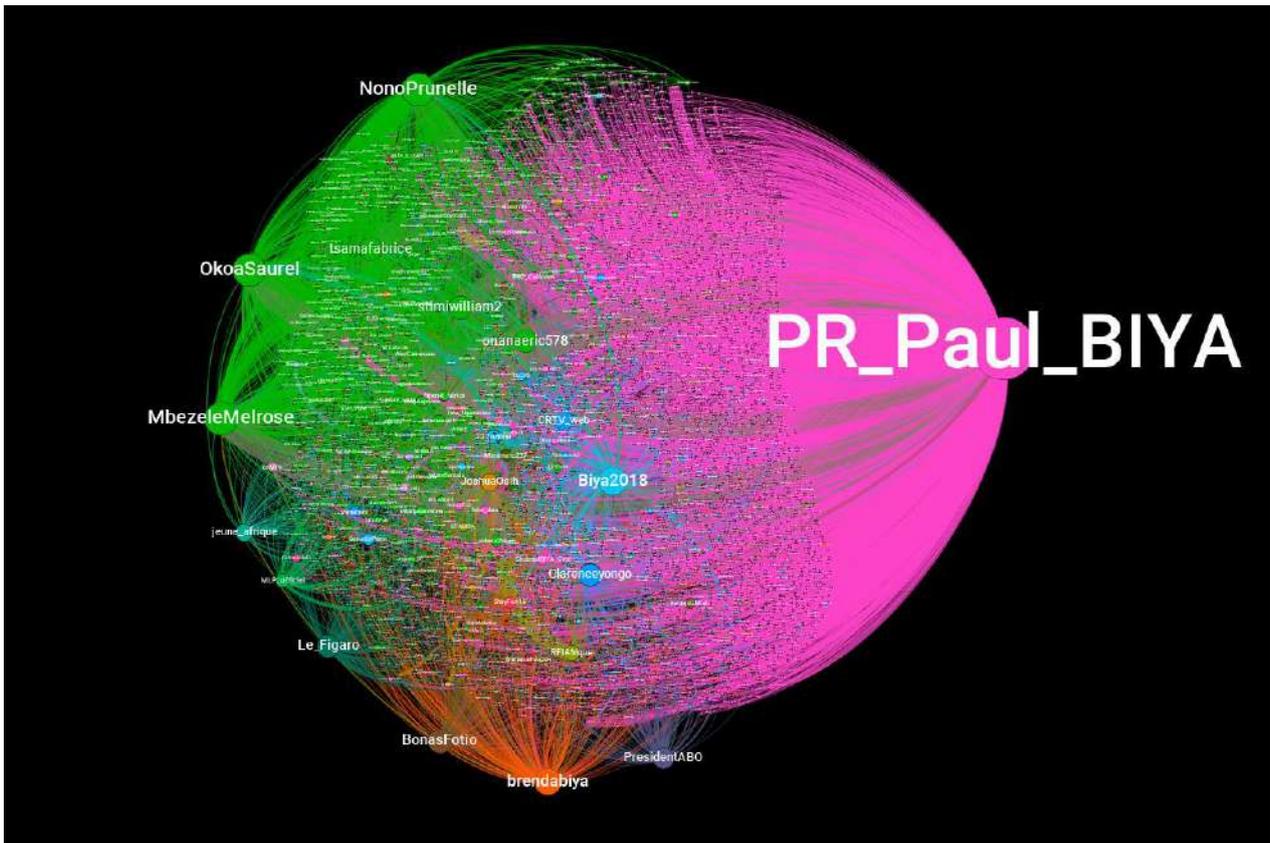
The qualitative analysis of actions made by the accounts, marked in different colours, show some coherence: each team pursuists common goals but with different actions.

The three in Table for, henceforth Red Team, are the accounts Mbezele Melrose, Okoa Saurel e Nono Prunelle. In June 13 comment the same tweet in which a Canadian blogger quotes President Paul Biya within a 1-2 minutes timespan.



**Table 7** Red Team comments

The contents published in the three months under scrutiny by the Red Team have been analysed through a Social Network Analysis, in way to pinpoint other members of the team active on Twitter. Table 8 shows the graph of established relations through another users' quote.



**Table 8** Social Network Analysis for Red Team Twitter accounts

The landmark community for the Red Team is the light green one on the left. In the external limit appear the three profiles already found. On the right, in pink, the one of President Paul Biya (the dimension is given by the several quotations it gets). Inside the green community other three particularly active profile appear: Tsamafabrice, Stimiwilliam2, Onanaeric578 (at the very centre of the community, bordering with the pink area). The same three users are present in the comments of the aforementioned example tweet (Table 9).



**Table 9** Comments by the three accounts emerged from the Social Network Analysis

## VI. AN EXAMPLE OF COORDINATED ACTION: RED TEAM IN ACTION

The tweet by the blogger Djoko Christian has been published at 00.57 June 14<sup>th</sup>. The tweet gets two retweets and six comments. The six comments are all published by the six Red Team members between 18.24 and 18.32 June 14<sup>th</sup>. The analysis of the sic profiles show a daily and coordinated activity, as shown in table 10, as they all made the same actions: a tweet and the share of the same article regarding Samuel Eto'o intervention favouring President Biya.

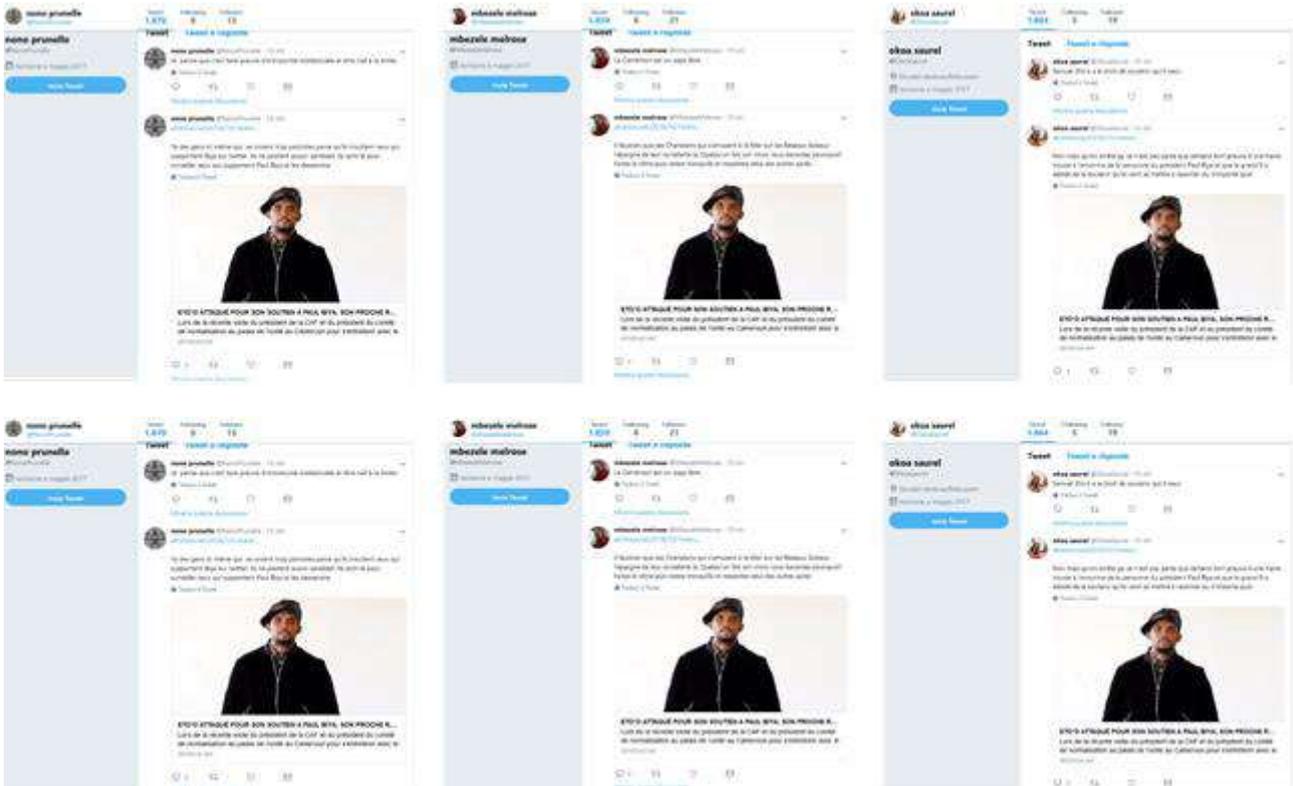


Table 10 Red Team Timeline

## VII. ARE WE REALLY DEALING WITH AN ORGANIZED TEAM?

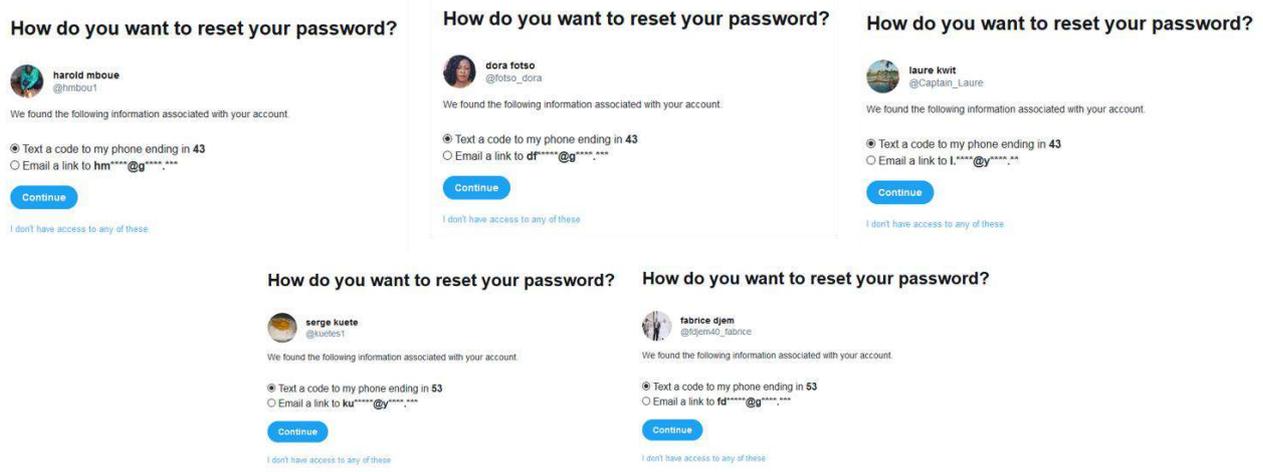
All it is left to figure out is the Red Team’s nature: a group of independent supporters or an organized team? The study of Twitter accounts shows with a certain degree of certainty the artificial nature of Red Team. All the profiles have been created in May 2017. Recovering the contacts used to register the profiles there is another clue: five out of six profiles have been registered through a cell phone number ending in “22”. All the profiles have been registered with a yahoo.com mail format [namesurname@yahoo.com](mailto:namesurname@yahoo.com) (Table 10). In conclusion, it is almost certain that they are six accounts created ad hoc and referring to just one owner: the owner of the “22” cell phone.



**Table 10** Twitter forms showing mail and phone number to which the Red Team accounts have been registered.

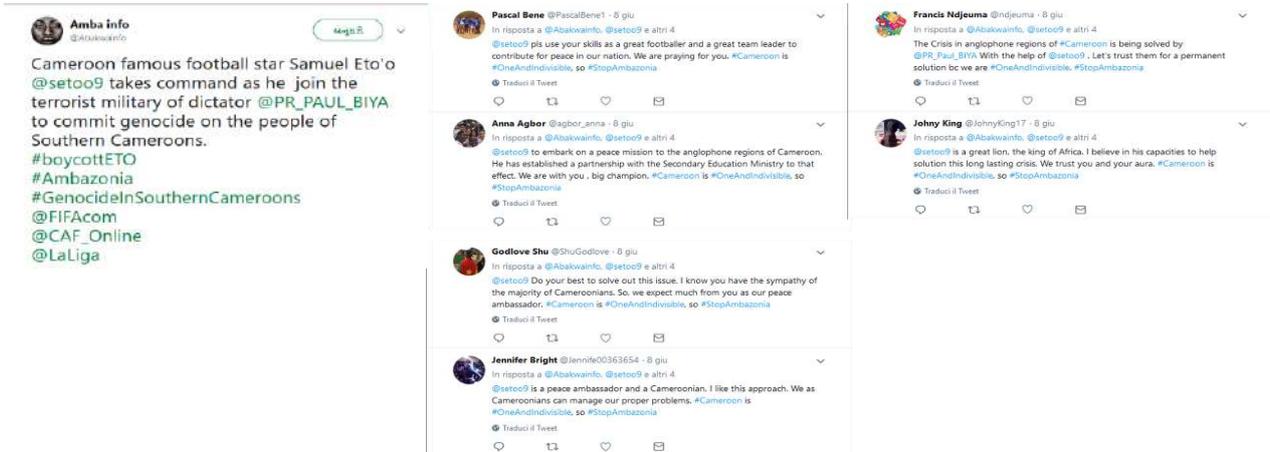
## VIII. GREEN AND YELLOW TEAM

Equivalent analysis to the one carried on the Red Team have been carried on Green and Yellow teams with similar results. Components of the Green Team are five Twitter users (Harold Mboue, Fabrice Djem, Laure Kwit, Serge Kuete, Dora fotso). All have been created in September 2018 (probably looking forward to the elections). All five have been registered by two mobile phone numbers: one ending with “43” and the other with “53” (Table 11). These accounts act in synchrony as well, publishing and commenting the same tweets.



**Table 11** Registration mail and phone number of Green Team accounts

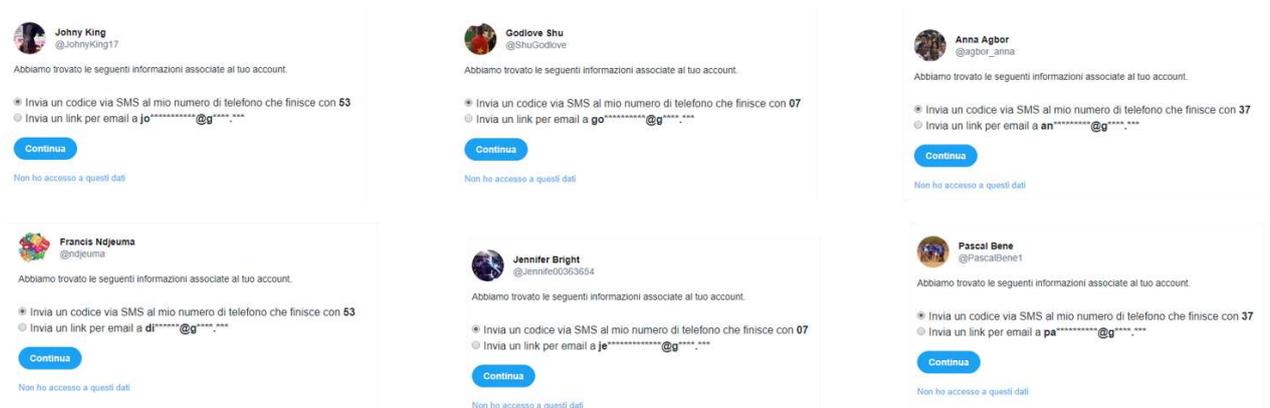
Similar analysis can be made for Yellow Team members. The accounts Pascal Bene, Anna Agbor, Godlove Shu, Jennifer Bright, Francis Ndjeuma e Johnny King. All these profiles share unusual characteristics: created in May 2018 but never tweeted. The only activity is commenting contents from other uses. Also this six accounts work jointly, as can be seen in table 12.



**Table 12** Yellow Team in action answering a critical tweet

The 7<sup>th</sup> of July the Account “Amba info” (in Bio: “We refuse to give up! Fighter for Southern Cameroon/Ambazonia liberation”) publishes a tweet, criticizing the support of Samuel Eto’o to President Biya (same theme of the article shared by the whole Red Team). Between 15.57 and 16.36 of June 8<sup>th</sup> the six accounts comment in favour of Paul Biya, supporting similar positions but closing each and every message with the formula: “#Cameroon is #OneAndIndivisible, so #StopAmbazonia”. The use of hashtags by organized groups is an elementary technique in Social Network *astroturfing*. Two are the possible main goals: spark or sustain the different phases of a opinion movement. This way, users and journalists can misinterpret the emergence of opinion groups or the participation of users to the debate as a spontaneous expression of a certain social or political group.

Also in the Yellow Team case, the profiles’ analysis falsified the hypothesis of a normal group of activists (Table 13):



**Table 13** Registration data of the Yellow Team



The whole Yellow Team is made of accounts created in May and the registration has been done with Gmail mails and cell phones numbers ending, in pairs, with the same pair of numbers (53, 07, 37). The study of the timeline in this six accounts shows a coherent behaviour, consistent to the one analyzed in the other accounts taken into consideration: all the accounts intervened in the same discussion supporting positions favourable to the one of President Biya.

## IX. COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA AND SUBSAHARIAN AFRICA

The explorative analysis carried on online retrieved data during the 2018 Cameroon elections have shown two key elements. All the main candidates in the last electoral turnout have invested in online communication and social network. The attention and the investments confirm the strategic relevance of the conversational digital ecosystem, offering both risks and opportunities. The first element concerns the global tendency that links citizens, policy makers, news outlets and international public opinion, and its presence in Cameroon and other contexts in subsaharian countries (Kenya, Nigeria) is now a certainty. A tendency that should consolidate in the near future as the internet cover broadens in all African countries and a modern urban middle class is established. Is a complex relationship, requiring interprets and an informed management strategy. The second element concerns the risks related to the growth of this ecosystem, and its centrality might be exploited with non-orthodox operations like proselytism or propaganda, and related information gathering activities and information analysis require a specific methodology.