**Data leaks**

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In the early hours of January 1, 2020, a Twitter handle, @hindsightfiles, allegedly run by Brittany Kaiser, a former employee of Cambridge Analytica, shared confidential documentation regarding the involvement of SCL Group, a now-defunct British firm, in numerous elections around the world.

The significance of these documents seems to be lost at a time when “World War III” was a top trending topic on social media. But parsing through the documents and pairing them with broader contextual developments, it is clear that foreign interference in politics, and especially elections, are entering a new level.

Kaiser worked on many of the projects but eventually decided to blow the whistle on her former employer. Some of the information about Kenya contained in the data leaks was already in the public domain, particularly on the firm’s now-deleted website.

For example, the papers allege that in 2012 the firm undertook an unprecedented, large and wide-ranging political perception survey of 47,000 households across the country. Then, they built a political party and a communications strategy around it.

For the 2017 election, Cambridge Analytica proposed a similar plan of action that paired these analogue strategies with digital strategies to help Uhuru Kenyatta win the election under his new party, Jubilee. Kenyatta would eventually win that election as well, but revelations about the firm’s practices would only further undermine a suspect process.

For the last 30 years, proponents of good governance as a gateway to economic development and other goods have been hedging their bets on free and fair elections as the starting point. But with companies like Cambridge Analytica getting involved and tipping the scales towards wealthy political parties in secretive and convoluted ways, it is clear that fair elections are increasingly elusive, and democracy is at risk.

With regards to Kenya, the leak confirms that a somewhat unqualified British firm was able to penetrate the highest levels of political office in Kenya fairly easily and secure massive payouts by offering pretty basic social science research.

Notably, the Kenyan president is the highest-profile individual named, his identity used to draw other people in, for instance, solicitation emails to teams around people like former Sierra Leonean President Ernest Koroma.

There are also telltale signs of how little they value African clients based on these amateurish solicitation emails. For example, in an email reaching out to Koroma’s cousin John Sisay, SCL CEO Mark Turnbull clearly added to a forwarded email without changing the colour of the text – the final email that goes out is in two colours.

Significantly, the leaked documents confirm what the firm and its subsidiary Cambridge Analytica have roundly denied – that the firm was in fact actively involved in the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. In an email from September 23, 2016, Turnbull asserts: “Our recent track record includes advising the Brexit campaign which saw the UK vote to leave the EU …”

Whether or not this was true, considering how emphatically they have denied their involvement in the campaign, it points to a culture of deceit within the firm and raises the question: what else are they lying about? If this is the material contained in official documents, what is contained in unofficial information? It underscores that the ethical environment around elections is far more compromised than the average voter realises.

The data leaks also show that the Jubilee administration has, since 2012, spent large amounts of money on this one company. Between December 2015 and April 2016, the party paid SCL $1.25m of a $1.3m contract. The first version of the 2017 election proposal contains a budget of $3.9m, but press reports put the final figure spent on the firm at approximately $6m.

Elections around the world are big business, and increasingly becoming a game for the rich, eroding the idea that parties are led by the best people, not just the wealthiest. More importantly, elections can no longer be held up as absolute protection against politicians displacing important social priorities in favour of personal political gains.

Moreover, in his book about Cambridge Analytica’s work, whistle-blower Christopher Wylie states that an unnamed African country moved similar money out of its health ministry in order to pay for the firm’s services.

With a budget of $500m for 19 million voters, at just more than $25 a head, the Kenyan election in 2017 was already by some estimates the most expensive election in the word per voter. Yet the value of these elaborate processes must be questioned if they only lead to more political and social uncertainty, as they did in Kenya.

The part of the Cambridge Analytica’s work that has come under the highest levels of public scrutiny is its digital strategy, where the firm’s secretive psychometrics approach relies on digital techniques to enhance survey data and produce political profiles of voters to help with targeted messaging.

In one draft of the Kenya pitch documents, under the digital strategy subheading, the author left seven Xs “XXXXXXX” as if this opaque element would be tagged onto the election strategy when the person drafting the strategy understood it better. Wylie and other whistle-blowers suggest that these digital strategies are a spectrum of shadowy digital practices and that in other countries the company certainly crossed the line.

On Trinidad and Tobago, for example, Wylie writes that the government made terabytes of critical personal digital information – locations, IP addresses and deanonymised census data – available to the firm to help craft the governing party’s political campaign. Wylie points out that based on the information given to the firm by the government, he was, from his computer in London, able to log into a private computer on the island and see what an individual was watching or looking up.

Excerpted from: ‘Cambridge Analytica and the end of elections’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org