After attempted coup in Gabon, government imposes internet and media broadcast blackout

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11 January 2019

The government of Ali Bongo Ondimba imposed a country-wide blackout of all Internet and television and radio broadcasting services throughout Gabon for more than 24 hours in the wake of an attempted coup Monday morning that saw insurgent soldiers take over the operations of state-owned television and radio broadcaster RadioDiffusion Television Gabonnaise in the capital city Libreville. The group's leader, Lt. Obiang Ondo Kelly, broadcast a call on national television for viewers to overthrow the Bongo government.

Several hundred demonstrators responded to the insurgent soldiers' call to "take control of the streets," and swarmed a downtown section of Libreville, setting a car aflame and burning several tires.

Expressing the anger toward the Bongo regime felt within a broad layer of the Gabonese masses, Stephane, a 27-year-old tripe seller, told *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), "What happened (yesterday) was a good thing, it should have worked. We have to get out of this situation. We weren't criminals or looters. We answered the call. We are 120-percent fed up!"

Another resident told AFP of the internet shutdown, "They did the same thing to us in 2016 [referring to the government's blackout of the internet during the 2016 election]. Can you understand how frustrating it is to live in a country where there is such a blackout?"

Gabonese security forces swiftly put down the coup attempt, killing two and arresting eight. Shortly afterward, the government declared "the situation is under control," and proclaimed that it had restored peace and order. In the wake of the government crackdown, the internet was cut, along with electricity in many sections across Libreville.

Agence de Press Gabonnaise (AGP) reported on Tuesday that order had been restored and routine had returned to Libreville, with children returning to school and businesses open. By then the government had restored internet access and broadcast services, after being down since the morning of the coup attempt.

Internet Without Borders, an organization which monitors internet censorship by governments around the globe, found that beginning Monday morning almost immediately after the coup attempt, internet connection requests from Gabon sharply dropped, indicating the starting point of the blackout. Traffic remained down for the next 28 hours. When the government lifted the blackout, traffic requests in the country began functioning as normal. Internet Without Borders' report was corroborated by Netblocks, another like-minded organization tracking censorship of the internet.

The cutting off of internet service to the population stands as a stark threat to the Gabonese masses that the Bongo regime is willing to resort to any means necessary to stifle any opposition to its rule. Such anti-democratic methods have been utilized by governments in countries around the world, including nearby Democratic Republic of the Congo, during the recent elections, and in Tunisia and Egypt, during the Arab Spring revolutions that overthrew the dictatorships in those countries.

The imposition of a complete blackout of internet and broadcast services has long been utilized as a tool of repression by the Bongo government. Comprising a quasi-dynasty, the Bongo family has been in power in Gabon for more than half a century.

During the 2009 and 2016 elections, internet service

and broadcasts were shut down in the days preceding the poll, illustrating the thoroughly criminal and anti-democratic character of the regime. Over the decades, the ruling government has arbitrarily shut down newspapers and broadcast media.

Security forces in 2012 raided and then shuttered two newspapers critical of the ruling government, *Ezombolo* and *La Une*. In a move ominously Orwellian the government body charged with the regulation of media, the National Communications Council, accused the two weeklies of "disrespecting public institutions and the personalities that embody them."

The underlying motive in carrying out these thoroughly anti-democratic actions is the palpable fear within the ruling elite of the Gabonese masses. The ruling class is acutely aware of their deep unpopularity and seek above all to quell a social explosion which may escape their control. In order to accomplish this the Bongo government is seeking to control the dissemination of information and to regulate what the masses see, hear and read.

The development of the internet has revolutionized mass communications and created a vast expansion in the manner by which workers are able to express ideas and their opposition to the ruling class, as evidenced in many protests organized over social media, such as the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, the teachers' strikes in the United States last year and recently, the Yellow Vest protests in France.

Efforts to censor the internet by governments worldwide are being led by the United States. In the closest collaboration with Google, Facebook, Twitter and other powerful information technology corporations, the American ruling class has implemented severe restrictions on access to socialist, antiwar and progressive websites. The growth of opposition from the working class has struck a chord of terror within the ruling class. In response they are seeking to severely limit workers' access to the internet and transform it into a tool of state surveillance, censorship and repression.