



The Diego Garcia dispute hits cyberspace

As internet domains go, .io is a money spinner. Would a change to the “British Indian Ocean Territory” cancel an asset?

By Dr James Mortensen & Samuel Bashfield

The dispute over the ownership of Diego Garcia and the rest of the [Chagos Archipelago](#) involves a [complex array](#) of legal, human rights, security and geopolitical issues. The United Kingdom wants to retain the islands it calls the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Mauritius wants to see the islands ceded to it. The United States wants to keep its military base. And many of the Chagossian diaspora who were forcibly removed decades ago want to return.

This multi-sided dispute has now been further complicated by arguments over ownership of the territory’s internet domain – “[.io](#)”. It seems that digital players may be increasingly caught up in geopolitics.

In the early days of the internet, countries and dependent territories were assigned a two-letter code to form part of the domain extension in a web address – .au for Australia, .uk for the United Kingdom, .nz for New Zealand, and so on. What might have initially seemed just an administrative designation has now become big business.

Responsibility for administration of these codes was granted by the [Internet Assigned Numbers Authority \(IANA\)](#) to so-called “responsible agents”. The identity of these agents varied widely between different nations. For example, the .au domain is regulated by the [Australian government](#), but the .uk domain is left to the [private sector](#).

BIOT received the domain designation .io, and the UK government left it entirely to the private sector to manage and profit from. As a result, the domain is “owned” by [Internet Computer Bureau](#) Ltd (ICB), a private company formed specifically to take advantage of niche domains. ICB in turn is now owned by US registry services giant [Afilias](#).

The .io domain has turned out to be a [big money spinner](#). As an abbreviation of Input/Output (an established programming maxim), .io is seen as a popular alternative for tech start-ups and cryptocurrency websites. Many legitimate businesses have included .io in their brand names, such as [Branch.io](#) and [Apiary.io](#). Even 2016 US presidential hopeful [Marco Rubio](#) used rub.io as a shortened URL for his campaign website.

Despite it being a country code, [Google treats](#) .io as a *generic* domain (just like .com). This means that companies looking for global exposure get better search results on “myproduct.io” than they would on, say, “myproduct.com.au”. As a result, .io addresses are popular and lucrative for all concerned. But with that business comes an inherent stake in the Chagos dispute.

For one thing, businesses that rely on .io are invested in the continuation of the domain name – and therefore in the continuation of BIOT itself. If Mauritius gains sovereignty over the Archipelago, BIOT will cease to exist as a dependent territory, meaning that the [domain may be scrapped](#). As domains are based on the International Organisation for Standardisation’s [ISO 3166-1 alpha-2](#) codes, the removal of the BIOT from the standard would likely precipitate the end of the .io domain. Historical country code [domain retirements](#) include Zaire’s .zr domain, which was replaced by .cd for the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Further, the Soviet Union’s .su was replaced with domains including .ru (Russian Federation), .by (Belarus), and .ua (Ukraine). Lastly, Czechoslovakia’s demise and subsequent retirement of .cs created .cz (Czech Republic) and .sk (Slovakia).

The retirement of .io would have severe financial implications for its administrators as well as for the many companies that use the domain. The loss of traffic caused by a domain change could be substantial in the case of many of .io’s most visited websites.

On the other hand, many Chagossians and their supporters are wondering where all the money generated by domain sales is going – and how they might get their fair share. Domains can be big business for small countries. The Pacific island country of Tuvalu generates [almost 10% of its annual revenue](#) from the sale of domain rights for .tv. [Montenegro](#) benefits from the .me domain. In contrast, the tiny Pacific island Niue unsuccessfully fought a Swedish company for control and some [\\$US150 million](#) in lost profits associated with the .nu domain, claiming it is a national asset. Control of the .io domain was [reportedly sold in 2017 for \\$US70 million](#), and its value will have only grown in the years since.

Already, the “[The Dark Side of .IO](#)” website – established by two .io users – successfully encourages .io start-ups to donate the equivalent domain renewal

fee to the [UK Chagos Support Association](#).

The same association added the .io domain to their proposed [list of income-generation mechanisms](#), should they be allowed to return to the Chagos. But as the British government does not administer the .io domain, this could create yet another impasse in the overall dispute.

There are also potential liabilities at stake. The .io domain is implicated in its fair share of criminal activity, including high-profile scams such as [OneCoin](#) and [USI Tech](#), and many .io websites are implicated in [child exploitation](#). Some European courts are considering whether to hold registrars [culpable for illegal activity](#) perpetrated on their domains. Any party that takes control over .io could be signing up for more than they bargained for.

Of course, the .io domain issue pales in comparison to the geostrategic stakes of the Chagos dispute for Indian Ocean security, but governments should be alert to these new actors and complications. Any future negotiated solution to the Chagos territorial dispute will probably need to take this issue into account – potentially even including the perpetuation of an “Indian Ocean” (or “IO”) territory – to preserve this profitable digital asset.

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