

Mali's '.ml' to target Malaysian internet users
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Domain names

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The Republic of Mali recently partnered with Freenom in an effort to promote domain name registrations under '.ml', the country-code top-level domain (ccTLD) for Mali, to increase internet use in the country and to raise Mali's online profile. Freenom is a Dutch company that operates the '.tk' registry, which is the ccTLD for Tokelau.

In May 2013, following the same business model as for '.tk', the Malian registry Dot ML (a privately funded joint venture between Freenom and AGETIC, the governmental organisation that runs the IT infrastructure in Mali) launched free domain name registrations under '.ml'.

As is to be expected, the business model of offering domain name registrations for free had the desired effect of increasing the number of '.ml' domain name registrations. According to Moussa Dolo, general manager of AGETIC, '.ml' has become "the fastest-growing country-code top-level domain in Africa". Indeed, the CEO of Freenom, Joost Zuurbier, stated that there are currently approximately 350,000 registered domain names, compared to just a few hundred at the beginning of 2013 before the '.ml' revolution.

However, it now appears that the model of free domain names in an effort to help raise internet awareness in Mali and to promote Mali's online identity has been set to one side in an attempt to continue to grow the volume of domain names under management in the '.ml' ccTLD.

In what appears to be a complete change of direction, Dot ML has now decided to present '.ml' as the new TLD for Malaysia and to target Malaysian internet users for domain name registrations. Mr Dolo recently stated:

"Over the last year we have seen a large increase of registrations from Malaysian users. We did our research and found out that the '.ml' extension is popular in Malaysia, as it is an abbreviation of the country name."

As a result of this, Dot ML has started to advertise '.ml' as the alternative to '.my', the official Malaysian ccTLD. As part of the marketing drive, Dot ML is promoting '.ml' domain names as easy and quick to register by anyone, free of charge; most importantly, they do not require paperwork, contrary to '.my' domain names. According to Dot ML, the registration process for '.my' domain names is slow and burdensome for Malaysian internet users and, in particular, for small and medium-size companies.

While it is true that registration requirements do exist for '.my' domain names and a local presence and supporting documentation is required, '.my' appears to be doing rather well in Malaysia. There are currently over 291,000 active '.my' domain names and domain name registrations have been increasing steadily over the years.

In response to Dot ML's announcement, the Malaysian Registry published a [press release](#) in which its CEO Hasnul Fadhy Hasan denounced the "clear misrepresentation of Malaysia". He stressed that '.my' is "the one and only ccTLD representing Malaysia" and that '.my' provides the citizens and business of Malaysia with "the true Malaysian identity online". Mr Hasan also highlighted that the documentation required to register a domain name is a crucial step to ensure that the domain name is held by a Malaysian or a legally operating entity, with a view to reducing fraud and abuse cases, thus protecting internet users.

Sadly, the same cannot be said of '.ml'. According to the latest [Global Phishing Survey report](#) published last September, '.ml' is the second most-used TLD for phishing attacks, after '.cf'. In fact, 20% of the world's malicious registrations were made in the '.tk', '.cf', '.ga' and '.ml' registries (all run by Freenom), which is not that surprising as all of these ccTLDs offer free domain name registrations and are available to anybody without restrictions.

Phishing is an attempt by malicious third parties to fool internet users into revealing sensitive data such as usernames, passwords and credit card details. This is often done by sending an email which purports to be from a genuine company, but sends internet users to a phishing website which resembles the company website and prompts users to provide their details.

Cybercriminality and the resulting potential bad reputation and loss of credibility for the '.ml' ccTLD might explain this move from the registry to turn to the rest of the world and to target other markets such as Malaysian internet users.

Another reason may be that '.ml' does not appear to have met with success within Mali itself. Indeed, internet usage is rather low in the country, possibly due to Mali being one of the poorest countries in the world. Consequently, according to a recent [article](#) published by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Mr Dolo has acknowledged that 94% of all '.ml' domain names were registered by people living outside of Mali.

This is not the first time that Freenom has 'repurposed' a ccTLD and attempted to penetrate other markets in an effort to grow the volume of domain name registrations. At one point, '.tk' was marketed as the new Turkish ccTLD, with Freenom claiming that '.tk' was easy to register, open to everyone and free, contrary to the official Turkish ccTLD '.tr' with its registration requirements. Freenom claims that '.tk' is now more popular amongst Turkish internet users than '.tr'.

It will be interesting to see if the same situation happens in Malaysia with '.ml'. In any event, the '.ml' registry intends to pursue the growth of '.ml' and is already thinking about the next stage. Indeed it is currently considering Manila and Milan as future targets if the launch in Malaysia is successful.

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