

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

*Digital futures for a post-pandemic world*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)  
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

## Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world

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# NIGERIA

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND SOCIAL MEDIA RESTRICTIONS ON CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA



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### Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society and human right organisations exposed government corruption, including financial misappropriation and the hoarding of food intended for aid, as well as human right abuses in Nigeria. This led to the so-called #EndSARS protests in 2020, a ban on Twitter for seven months, and a brutal clampdown on protestors by the security establishment.

While the government's relentless efforts to clamp down on social media have narrowed the space for civil society engagement, it is also likely to contribute to increasing human rights violations and corruption in Nigeria. At the same time, the increase in youth unemployment, blamed on the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent economic lockdown and restrictions, does not properly take into account the economic implications of the government's repression and censoring of social media.

In the context of the #EndSARS protests, this report discusses the efforts by the government to restrict social media, and the potential impact on human rights and the economy.

### Background

Online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube provide citizens the opportunity to express their concerns, spread information in real time as well as engage directly with those who govern them. However, with reports of social media abuses, what governments and their institutions across the world consider as efforts aimed at ending the menace of misinformation and disinformation<sup>1</sup> are resulting in new measures to monitor and regulate the use of these platforms.

Legislation targeting social media is not new in Nigeria. Calls to regulate it intensified after the 2015 general election due to the influence that digital media platforms had in the process, with many of these efforts spearheaded by the Buhari-led federal government, which came into power.

In November 2015, Deputy Senate Leader Ibn Na' Allah sponsored the Frivolous Petition Bill 2015, otherwise known as the "anti-social media bill", which was referred to the Senate Committee on Judiciary, Human Rights and Legal Matters for further recommendations.<sup>2</sup> Also, in March 2018, the then deputy chief whip of the Senate, Abdullahi Aliu Sabi, introduced a bill seeking the prohibition of hate speech in the country. The bill was withdrawn by the lawmakers due to a backlash from Nigerians and rights watchdogs outside of the country. However, it was re-introduced by the Senate in November 2019.

The hate speech bill proposed a jail term of no less than five years or a fine of no less than less than NGN 10 million (USD 24,000), or both, for offences like harassment on the basis of ethnicity and race.<sup>3</sup>

The government, in a more desperate move, established a national commission for the prohibition of hate speech and gave legislative power to the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to regulate social media platforms in the country. These moves came with the backdrop of 16 laws already in existence which enabled the Nigerian state to acquire citizen data and conduct surveillance operations.

There is a growing use of social media among Nigerians, with many finding these platforms an easy and cheap means of communication. Nigeria's social media users were estimated at 33 million in January 2021,<sup>4</sup> mostly young people. It is a significant number, although relatively small for a country with a population of over 200 million people. Nevertheless, any attempts by government to regulate social media will be viewed as a deliberate attack on young people, a move to suppress the voices of young

1 Santas, T., & Inobemhe, K. (2021). Social Media Regulation in a Democratic Nigeria: Challenges and Implication. *MCC*, 5(1), 71-88. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353429624\\_Social\\_Media\\_Regulation\\_in\\_a\\_Democratic\\_Nigeria\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Implication](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353429624_Social_Media_Regulation_in_a_Democratic_Nigeria_Challenges_and_Implication)

2 Agbede, O. (2021, 26 June). Social media regulation: Between failed attempts and Buhari's current move. *The Guardian*. <https://guardian.ng/saturday-magazine/cover/social-media-regulation-between-failed-attempts-and-buharis-current-move>

3 Ibid.

4 Kemp, S. (2001, 11 February). Digital 2021: Nigeria. *DataReportal*. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-nigeria>

people – and possibly to cover up the maladministration and corruption in the government.

This is disturbing for a country with an unemployment rate which stood at 33.3% in the fourth quarter of 2020<sup>5</sup> – and could be worse in the future, if nothing is done to address current youth unemployment. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the unemployed figure represents a labour force of about 23,187,389 persons in Nigeria, either doing nothing or working for less than 20 hours a week. The age group categories with the highest rates of unemployment were persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (53.4%) and 25 and 34 (37%).<sup>6</sup>

### Twitter ban during the 2020 #EndSARS protest

Many countries, including Nigeria, are seen to infringe on the fundamental and constitutional rights of their citizens to access information and to freedom of expression and association. They use legislation, policies and programmes aimed at limiting citizens' access to valuable information and their participation in democratic processes.

The Nigerian government's recent attempts to regulate social media were framed as an attempt to push back against fake news. However, in a dramatic manner, on 4 June 2021, Nigeria banned Twitter, joining countries like China, Iran, North Korea and Turkmenistan where social media have been suspended or banned outright.

The Twitter ban happened during the so-called #EndSARS protests – when social media platforms, especially Twitter, were used by the youth to call for the disbanding of the Nigerian Police Force Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which had been accused in the past of extortion, harassment, brutality, killings and other abuses, including rape. Young people had expressed their frustration during the COVID-19 lockdown measures and stay-at-home orders, as well as their dissatisfaction with the political handling and hoarding by politicians of goods, especially food items, that were meant to be distributed to cushion the effect of the pandemic on citizens. Attempts by the youth to break into warehouses across the country in search of the hoarded food were blocked in some places by the SARS, and arrests made. In their frustration, young people took to the streets, using social media – and several hashtags<sup>7</sup> – to organise their protests.

The federal government, announcing the Twitter ban through Information Minister Alhaji Lai Mohammed, said the use of Twitter was “capable of undermining the corporate existence of Nigeria.” While this was a direct result of the perceived role of Twitter in the #EndSARS protests, and the consequent destruction and looting of government property, Twitter had also deleted a post on the protests by President Muhammadu Buhari, where he referred to Nigeria's civil war between 1967 and 1970, saying that most of those “misbehaving” by burning electoral offices and police stations were too young to understand the gravity of war, and threatening to deal with arsonists and looters in “the language they understand.”<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, the NBC implemented the president's orders, and directed all network providers to block access to Twitter services in the country. It further instructed all social media platforms and on-line broadcasting services to register and obtain an operational licence, or face sanctions.

Although some users bypassed internet service providers in the country by using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access Twitter for the seven months of the ban, the decision sparked an outcry and many public debates. While some argued in support of the government ban, many accused it of a knee-jerk reaction to Twitter deleting the president's post, which according to Twitter violated its global community policies. However – and not far from the truth – the ban was also seen as one way for the government to vent its anger at young people, and the accusations levelled against it.

### Impact of the Twitter ban on the Nigerian economy

Communication technology is responsible for an estimated 10% of Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>9</sup> The online benefits for an economy where an estimated 33 million people use social media, including business owners for direct advertising or engaging their clients and customers, cannot be underestimated or politicised.

After 222 days, the Nigerian federal government lifted the ban on Twitter operations in the country. NetBlocks estimated an economic loss of NGN 104.02 million (USD 250,600) every hour, amounting to a NGN 2.46 billion (USD 5.9 million)

5 Elebeke, E. (2021, 15 March). Nigeria's unemployment rate rises to 33.3%. *Vanguard*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/03/nigerias-unemployment-rate-rises-to-33-3>

6 Popoola, N., et al. (2021, 16 March). Unemployment rate hits 33.3%, 23.18million Nigerians jobless – NBS. *Punch*. <https://punchng.com/unemployment-rate-hits-33-3-23-18million-nigerians-jobless-nbs/>

7 These included #EndSARS, #ReformPoliceNG, #OccupyLekki, #OccupyNigeria, #OccupyNASS, #SaveNigeriaGroup and #OurMumuDonDo (“Our foolishness is enough”).

8 Agbede, O. (2021, 26 June). Op. cit.

9 Olojo, A., & Allen, K. (2021, 24 June). Social media and the state: challenging the rules of engagement. *Institute for Security Studies*. <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/social-media-and-the-state-challenging-the-rules-of-engagement>

daily loss.<sup>10</sup> This is depressing and economic sabotage for a country with an unemployment rate of 33.3% in the same year, affecting mostly young people. The knowledge of the economic sabotage may have prompted civil society organisations including Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project<sup>11</sup> to challenge the decision of the federal government in court.

### **Peaceful protestors attacked at Lekki Tollgate: A panel investigates**

One of the worst incidents of police violence during the protests happened in Lekki, a coastal city in Lagos state in the southwest of the country. On 20 October 2020, young people were peacefully protesting police brutality in Nigeria at the Lekki Tollgate. Security forces, on the invitation of the Lagos state government, allegedly opened fire to disperse the protesters while they were waving the country's flag and singing the Nigerian national anthem. This resulted in many protestors sustaining injuries and reports of deaths.

Footage of the sad incident trended on social media, particularly on Twitter, exposing serious human right violations by state actors in Nigeria. The federal government, by way of exonerating itself from the global condemnation of the incident, mandated the governors of the 36 states in Nigeria, as well as the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, to set up an investigative panel of inquiry on reported cases of police brutality across the country, with one hearing specifically reviewing the Lekki Tollgate incident.

Ironically, the panel's report, which has since been published, was rejected by the government. It documented several cases of police brutality, extortion, human rights abuses and killings by military personnel and other security agencies at the Lekki Tollgate on 20 October 2020, and the day after.

The panel found that the "Nigeria Army [which had been invited by the Lagos State Government to intervene] shot, injured and killed unarmed helpless and defenseless protestors without provocation or justification, while waving the Nigeria flag and singing the National Anthem."<sup>12</sup>

The Lagos panel indicted the security personnel responsible, and for trying to cover up their actions by removing bullet cartridges from the scene.

The Lagos state government, yet to implement the white paper of the report, denied inviting the army to the Lekki Tollgate when it happened.

The panel received about 235 petitions connected to the activities of the already disbanded Nigeria Police Force Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). These included extortion, harassment and the killing of citizens they were meant to protect. Of this number, 45 of the petitions already have judgments delivered by competent courts of law in their favour, but the complainants have yet to receive any compensation from the Nigerian police or federal government.

### **The impact of COVID-19 and social media restrictions on civil society engagement**

Most civil society organisations, particularly in the global South including Nigeria, are struggling to stay afloat and sustain their engagements. In Nigeria, both government censorship and restrictions on social media, and the COVID-19 outbreak, which imposed restrictions on physical gatherings and in turn affected funding support for non-COVID-related activities, have had a huge impact on civil society activities.

From the suspension of Twitter in early June 2020, to the enactment of the anti-social media bill and hate speech bill,<sup>13</sup> to the amendment of the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Act under parliamentary consideration, laws have been formulated to repress civil society engagement and criminalise information sharing both in print media and online.

Between 2015 and 2021 alone, the Closing Civic Spaces database documented over 300 incidents cracking down on freedom of expression, assembly and association in Nigeria.<sup>14</sup>

Also, we surveyed over 50 civil society and human rights organisations in Nigeria, in order to better understand the direct impact of COVID-19 and social media restrictions on civil society engagement on the ground. They all said the pandemic, government censorship, clampdowns on freedoms and social media regulations have significantly impacted on their activities. According to them, the situation is worse under the COVID-19 pandemic because their access to both local and international funding has become limited.

10 Dataphyte. (2022, 15 January). Twitter ban, Tinubu's tweeps, and N500bn tantrum. <https://www.dataphyte.com/latest-reports/special-report/twitter-ban-tinubu-tweeps-and-n500bn-tantrum>; Conroy-Krutz, J. (2021, 7 June). Nigeria Has Banned Twitter. Here's What This Could Mean for Its Democracy and Online Activism. *Global Citizen*. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/nigeria-twitter-ban-could-hurt-economy>

11 <https://serap-nigeria.org>

12 Lagos State Ministry of Justice. (2020). *Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Restitution for Victims of SARS Related Abuses and Other Matters: Consolidated Report on General Police Brutality Cases*. <https://lagosstatemoj.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Consolidated-Report-of-the-Judicial-Panel-of-Inquiry-on-general-Police-brutality-cases.pdf>

13 Ibezim-Ohaeri, V., Olufemi, J., Nwodo, L., Olufemi, O., Juba-Nwosu, N., & TIERS. (2021). *Security Playbook of Digital Authoritarianism in Nigeria*. Action Group on Free Civic Space. <https://closingspaces.org/the-security-playbook-of-digital-authoritarianism-in-nigeria>

14 <https://closingspaces.org>

They find the new measures more challenging, and the fear of arrest or harassment by security agencies, already monitoring online posts and other activities of civil society organisations and human rights activists, has resulted in individuals exiting the civil engagement space.

## Conclusion

The Buhari-led federal government's unrelenting efforts to regulate the use of social media and on-line platforms in Nigeria will have both short- and long-term negative impacts on press freedom, civil society engagement and citizens' participation in democratic governance.

The passage of the anti-social media bill, the censorship of the media and new measures in place to regulate social media platforms, like the suspension of Twitter, will also undoubtedly have huge economic knock-on implications for a country with a high unemployment rate that mostly affects young people. The political, economic and financial losses during the Twitter ban are yet to be fully understood. However, the regulations are likely to further constrain the activities of civil society organisations already struggling to stay afloat, especially under the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global funding flows. A number of people and organisations are now exiting the civil society space.

If the attack on citizens' engagement continues in Nigeria, citizens may lose their right to freedom of expression as outlined in the 1999 constitution and the Open Government Partnership,<sup>15</sup> to which the country is signatory. This will further worsen the existing human rights abuses and violations and, importantly, the activities of civil society organisations working to strengthen Nigeria's fragile democratic processes.

Like never before, civil society actors and human right activists are campaigning against impunity and bad governance, demanding accountability for widespread injustices, while mounting pressure on federal and state authorities to address issues of public concerns. Much of this advocacy is taking place on social media platforms.

## Action steps

The following key actions steps are necessary in Nigeria:

- There is an increasing need for civil society organisations to be able to properly verify available information online before using the information for advocacy. In this regard, training is needed in fact checking and other skills such as understanding and interpreting data.
- There is need for civil society organisations to build in-house research and advocacy capacity to properly address the shutting down of online civic space through new regulations.
- Civil society organisations need to better collaborate among themselves and form network organisations will help them to speak with one voice.
- They need to collaborate with academic and research institutions to reduce the cost of developing data sets to conduct evidence-based advocacy and to help sustain their engagements.
- In times of crisis, such as now, there is a need for civil society organisations and activists to as much as possible remain balanced, objective and firm in their engagement with the government, to avoid giving it excuses for further restrictions on social media, and harassment of activists through legal means.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.opengovpartnership.org>



## **DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD**

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

**GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH**  
2021-2022 Report  
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