



AFRICAN FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION
EXCHANGE (AFEX)

The Economic and Political Outcomes of Twitter Ban in Nigeria



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A report by



Introduction

Data provided by the Nigerian Communications Commission show that in the second quarter of 2021, there were 204,601,313 subscribers to telecommunication operators in Nigeria. From this figure, there are 101.72 million mobile Internet users with WhatsApp (93%), Facebook (86.2%) and YouTube (81.6%) leading the pack.

Twitter ranks sixth 61.4% and for the year 2021, Internet user penetration stands at 51.44% share of the total population¹.

Available statistics indicate that there are 103 television stations, 277 radio stations, over 40 national newspapers, 111.6 million Internet users and 25 million smart-phone users in the country.

Among these people are 20 million and 7 million Nigerians using Facebook and Twitter respectively².

The digital presence of citizens shows a fertile ground for online civic engagement and participation in national discourses and presents opportunities for improved accountability, quick decision making, improved digital economy, and e-business transactions in cashless economy. There is also a negative angle to this with possible rise in cyber security issues, fake news, misinformation, disinformation and ethnic and tribal attacks in a nation polarized along ethnic, tribal, and religious lines.

The social media bill in the National Assembly, arrest of protesters, journalists and activists for their posts on social media, the ban on Twitter, and monitoring of social media posts of citizens (especially the recent alleged attempt at monitoring WhatsApp platform) in Nigeria are developments that underlie the rating of Nigeria as a partially free nation (59%) by Freedom House.

¹ Statista (2021). Nigeria: mobile Internet users 2016-2026. Statista.com

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021). Incitement to terrorism through the media; UNODC organizes workshop on anti-terror law for journalists, security agencies, UNODC, Nigeria.

Usually, insecurity and national unity are two prominent reasons adduced by government for its restrictions on the Internet freedom of citizens, especially the control of hate speech, recruitment into banditry and terrorism, misinformation and disinformation, tension, secessionist agenda and inter-tribal and religious crises.

Although these are genuine national issues, the reasons are weighed side-by-side the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, access to, and sharing of, information, and the untold effects on the economy by citizens in their various discourses³.

In this report, we compare data on the digital landscape of the country with citizens' interpretations of the restrictions on Internet freedom to highlight the issues that government and citizens need to address to creatively manage the digital landscape for national and personal growth and development.

Explaining the Other Reasons for Internet Restrictions

Beyond national insecurity and threats to national unity, there are other underlying reasons for recent attempts denying citizens Internet freedom.

The call for accountability has tremendously grown with increased Internet penetration and social media use by Nigerians⁴. Millions of Nigerians and groups have found their voices online, asking questions about government's activities, and performance. It is therefore increasingly difficult for elected and appointed representatives to hide from public scrutiny.

Political and economic corruption, one of the indices of bad governance and leadership failure, is now being challenged online with increased intensity. There has also been a corresponding increase in 'protest mobilization, actual protests, and other forms of civic action' staged on such digital platforms in Nigeria.

³ Anyim, W.O. (2021). "Twitter ban in Nigeria: Implications on economy, freedom of speech and information sharing". *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 5975. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/5975>.

⁴ Oladapo, O. and Ojebode, A. (2021). Nigeria digital rights landscape report. Digital rights in closing civic space: Lessons from ten African countries. *Institute of Development Studies*, United Kingdom.

In most cases, these protests graduated from online activism to offline civic actions. For example, #NotTooYoungToRule, #BringBackOurGirls, #OccupyNigeria, #Buharimustgo, and #ENDSARS are notable protests that called the government to duty. In a way, they ‘forced’ government to listen and possibly take actions to address issues raised⁵.

In all of these, there is a growing intolerance on the part of government against deliberations in the digital space. The present administration equates online discourses, criticisms, or ‘demand for accountability’ to support for the opposition party (PDP)⁶. Its response is evident in arrest of bloggers, activists and journalists, fines (for media organisations), sponsored online attacks, sponsorship of bills to control the digital space, rejection of bills seen as opposition to government’s restrictions of the digital space, and labelling of all discourses against government as fake news and ‘wailing wailers’.

The intolerance and response are aggravated in the digital space by name calling, open condemnation, and other vituperations of citizens against the government. The president and some of his ministers have been targeted by known and faceless social media users, a development that fuels government’s resolve to restrict Internet freedom.

The Twitter ban in 2021 was predicted by a scholar, who raised an alarm that government had plans to “launch spy satellites, block websites and blogs that are critical of the government and its performance, and place mobile phones under surveillance”⁷.

What happened in 2013 when GSM services were totally restricted in Adamawa, Yobe and Borno states have been repeated in 2021 in Katsina, Zamfara, and Kaduna states.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Oladapo, O. and Ojebode, A. (2021). Nigeria digital rights landscape report. Digital rights in closing civic space: Lessons from ten African countries. Institute of Development Studies, United Kingdom.

These developments raise apprehension on the state of freedom of speech, civic participation, business development, and protection of citizens' database in the digital space (security agencies have access to subscribers' data).

Twitter Ban: Comparing Internet and Economic Freedom Indicators and Public Perception on Twitter

Twitter ranks after Facebook and WhatsApp as a social networking platform used by millions of Nigerians. Beyond daily social/interpersonal exchanges and news dissemination, the platform is mostly used for official business transactions by corporations, private companies, small business owners, investors, clients and customers in their networks.

In a nation battling crippling unemployment and ripples of economic recession, millions of young people are said to depend on the affordances of Twitter for survival by advertising their products/businesses and transacting businesses with their clients and customers.

In the statistics released by *NetBlocks*, there has been a daily loss of 2.5 billion naira to the economy since the ban started, while the gains of the small and medium scale enterprises recorded in the past ten years have also been lost to the ban⁸. The inability to freely and promptly communicate with distant business associates, loss of jobs, failure of businesses, and international investment hostilities have followed the ban of Twitter in the country⁹.

The same scholar noted the mass condemnation of the ban by activists, socio-cultural, ethnic and religious organisations, politicians, prominent Nigerians, international human rights agencies, and other nations of the world, with repeated calls on government to un-ban the social media platform.

⁸ Iyatse, G. and Adepetun, A. (2021, June 7). \$12b e-commerce suffers as Twitter ban costs N7.5 billion in three days. *The Guardian*, 37 (15, 502) pp. 1-2.

⁹ Anyim, W.O. (2021). "Twitter ban in Nigeria: Implications on economy, freedom of speech and information sharing". *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 5975. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/5975>.

Apart from the economic hazards, the ban violates the provisions of such instruments as the nation's constitution, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantee the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that is to hold opinions, receive and impart information; and to contribute to political discourses and development in the country¹⁰.

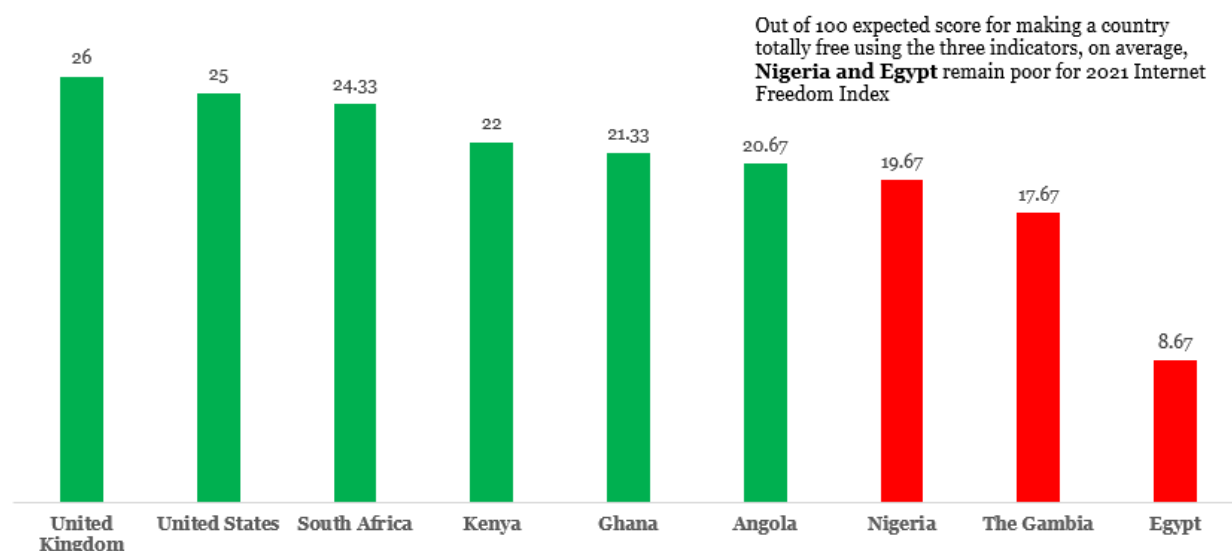
This report situates the ban within the contexts of available data and online discourses of the ban. It presents insights on what concerned stakeholders need to do to further strengthen Internet freedom and promote its availability as a digital economy for citizens. Although existing literature has provided some evidence on the rights of citizens that have been denied as a result of Twitter ban, this report adds to the debate with an analysis of citizens' posts and comments on their specific rights that have been limited and what adverse effects are associated with the violation.

The first data source for answering these questions is the 2021 Internet Freedom Index, where Nigeria is ranked with eight other countries (Ghana, UK, US, Angola, The Gambia, South Africa, Kenya, and Egypt) using obstacles to access, limits on content and violations of users' rights as the indicators for categorizing countries into totally free, partially free and not free. This comparison with some of her counterparts in the global south, especially Africa, and the global north, which has the United States and the United Kingdom among other developed countries, will give room for a better appreciation. Data in *Exhibit 1* establish individual country's average performance across the three indicators. The outcomes seem not to be a surprise as further analysis reveals positive connection among the three indicators for the countries. The level of obstacles to accessing the Internet in these countries resonated with the limits on content by 52.7% and connected with violations of users' rights by 57%. This implies that Nigeria, The Gambia and Egypt with low performance on the Index are the major promoters of obstacles to access. The three countries also rank very high on content limitations as analysis shows that limits on content is related to violations of users' rights by 93.1%. However, this does not mean that the remaining countries are not culpable. For instance, majority of them also

¹⁰ Anyim, W.O. (2021). "Twitter ban in Nigeria: Implications on economy, freedom of speech and information sharing". *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 5975. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/5975>.

have low scores for obstacles to access and limits on content, but the low score is not as high as what Nigeria, The Gambia and Egypt attained¹¹.

Exhibit 1: Relative Average Internet Freedom Performance of Nigeria among selected Countries



Source: *Internet Freedom Index, 2021*

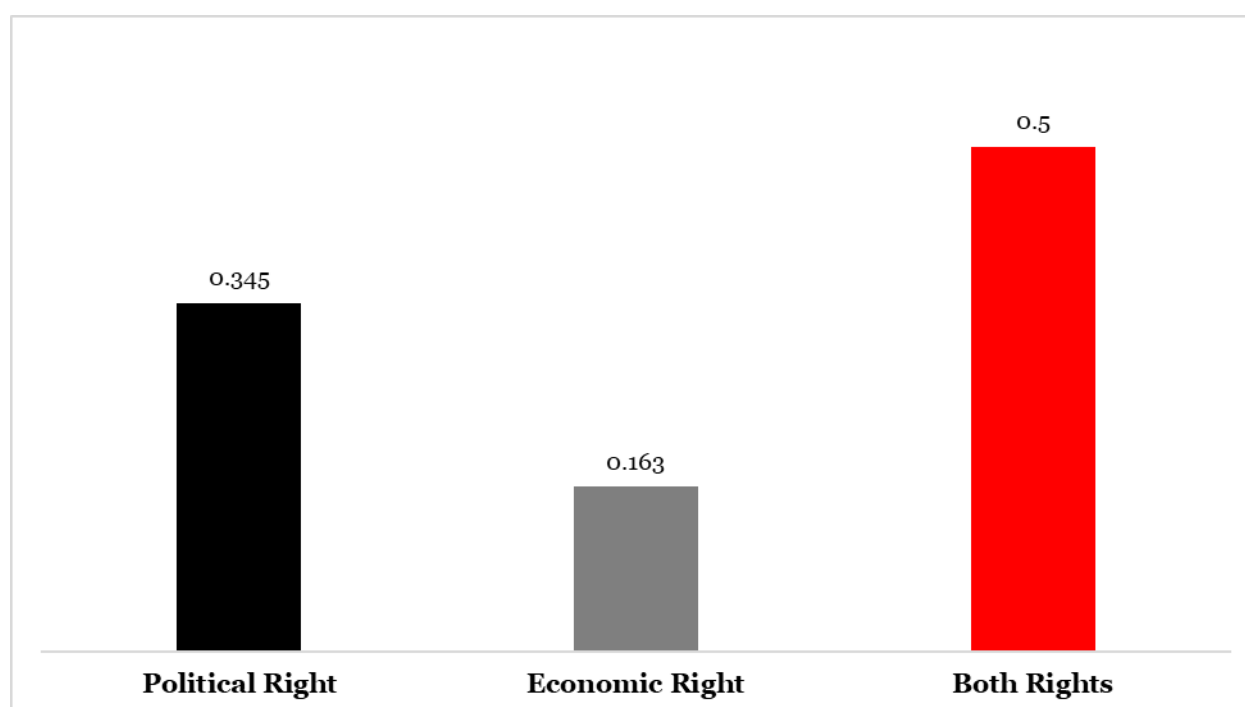
The second data source is the tweets¹² from Nigerians and others who tweeted and retweeted some hours after the Nigerian government announced the suspension of Twitter. From 2,181 tweets, 1,396 tweets show that the users mostly referenced both their **political and economic rights**¹³ as rights that were violated with the ban. However, on an individual basis, political right was more referenced than economic right [see *Exhibit 2*].

¹¹ Internet Freedom Index 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>

¹² The tweets were warehoused using Internet-enabled data mining and collection software. This allows collection of the tweets in real time. The collection was done within 24 hours of the suspension.

¹³ Political and economic rights represent the users' views about the suspension with the specific reference to the government's intent of denying them opportunity of expressing critical views about the government's actions and inactions. Economic right signifies the belief that suspending the platform represents denying businesses the right of using the platform for marketing and communication purposes, which has the tendency of increasing their profitability and also the right means denying the youths opportunity of using the platform to address the rising unemployment rate among them.

Exhibit 2: Severity of Referencing the Rights



Source: Nigerian Twitter Community, 2021.

This shows that most Nigerians who tweeted felt that their political right were denied more than their economic right. In the excerpts below, the tweets of some Nigerians are presented to show some of the elements that established the rights and issues referenced by the public:

1. RT @DrJoeAbah: The blanket #TwitterBan represents a disturbing contraction of the civic space for responsible free speech and debate [**Political Right**]. I can see no upsides to it for citizens, the government or the reputation of the country [**Generating Bad International Reputation**]. I urge the government to reconsider.
2. "So, one man's egoistic decision is binding on over 200m people just like that? That's too much power to confer on a single soul without a check no matter how high, complete or goodhearted he is [**Absolute Power Corrupt**]. Not to mention a man not worthy to be a WhatsApp admin of 3 members [**Poor Leadership**].
3. RT @tonitone: The Nigerian government doesn't seek to empower its people [**Economic Right**]. It seeks to silence and control them [**Political Right**]. If the people mattered, their focus would be on tackling unemployment, paying out pensions, improving infrastructure, etc... [**Previous Economic Issues**] Not banning a social media platform [**Political Right**]. #TwitterBan".
4. RT @NicolasJSimard: These #HumanRights should be fully protected [**Political Right**], while preventing inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech that could fuel tension and conflict [**Monitoring the Platform**] (2/2) #TwitterBan #Nigeria.

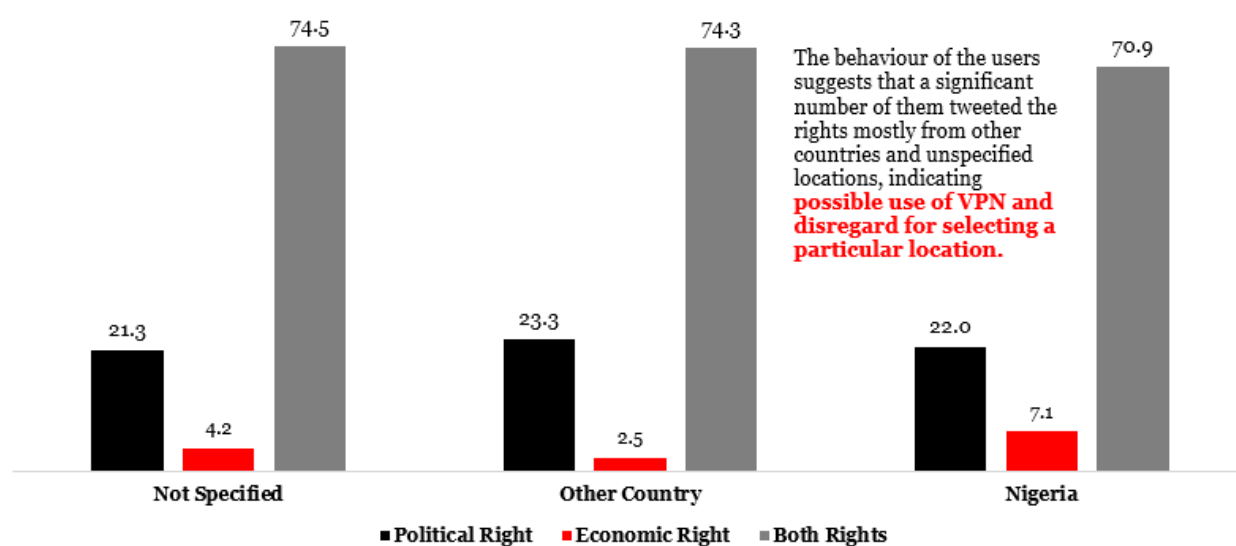
5. RT @BAMPI: 80% of my customers are on this app I can go weeks without selling anything and I have days I sell more than 5 Tees [**Economic Right**]. Twitter helps a lot of us with small businesses, they won't provide jobs for us yet they won't let us hustle for ourselves. #TwitterBan #business [**Previous and Future Economic Issues**].
6. RT @itsLaycon: How will you throw tantrum over a deleted tweet at the expense of the livelihood of the people you begged to serve, the democratic tenets you swore an oath to uphold and defend [**Economic and Political Rights**]. Let's even look at the logic behind the twitter ban.

This analysis shows that the Nigerian public was scared of possible sanctions from government because over 70% of 1,396 tweets that established the restrictions of political and economic rights came from such countries as the United Kingdom, the United States, Ghana, South Africa and Canada where majority of the users tweeted.

Furthermore, a large number of the tweets also came from Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Ibadan, Port-Harcourt, Kaduna, Osogbo, and Abeokuta. Another significant insight from the dataset is the proliferation of retweets more than the main tweets. The users largely retweeted the tweets of political and entertainment celebrities.

For instance, the tweets of Omoyele Sowore (a political activist) and Davido (a musician) were predominantly retweeted by other members of the Nigerian Twitter Community. Both rights were predominantly discussed by users who tweeted from other countries and unspecified locations than those who reside in Nigeria [*see Exhibit 4*].

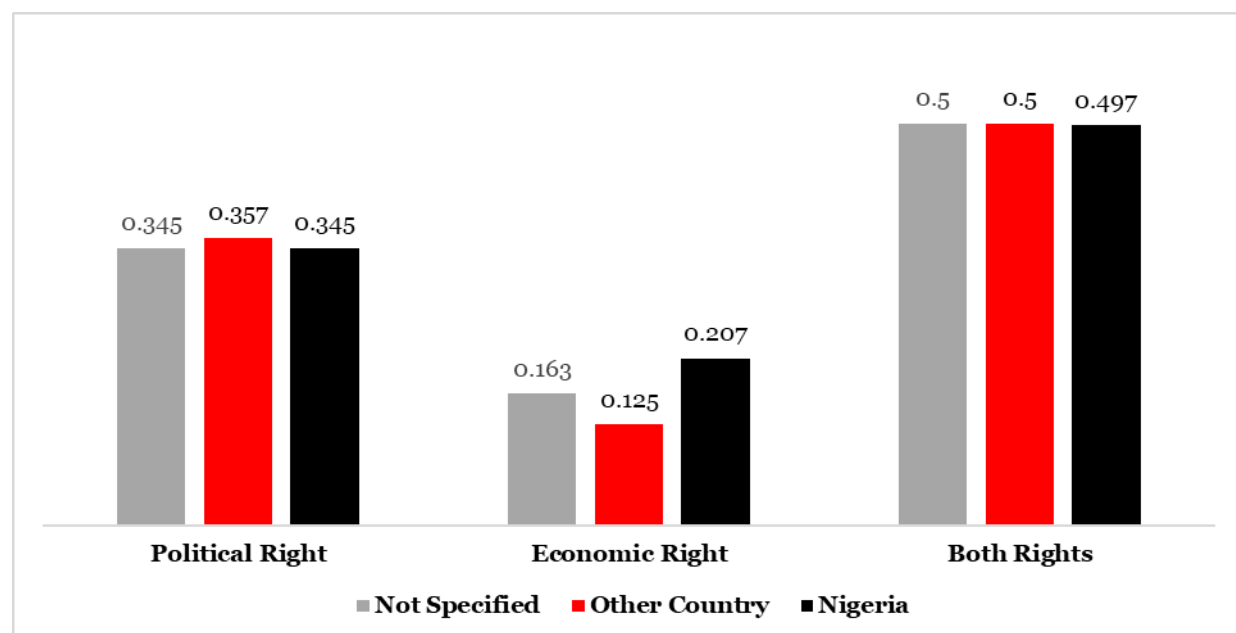
Exhibit 3: Locations Where the Expressions of the Rights came From



Source: Nigerian Twitter Community, 2021.

It is possible that most of the people who tweeted used VPN to hide their locational identities in order to continue to tweet and also evade sanctions from government. Since most of their tweets were on politics, Internet monitoring may identify the excessiveness of their tweets and raise such for a probe.

Exhibit 4: Locations: Threats of Tweeting About the Rights



Source: Nigerian Twitter Community, 2021.

The comparative prominence of the effects of the Twitter ban on the economic and political rights of Nigerians is clearly shown in Exhibit 4. The comparative bars show that those who tweeted from outside of the country were more than those who did within Nigeria.

If those whose locations were not specified are added to those who tweeted from other countries, it is reasonable to probably conclude that those who tweeted from outside Nigeria on the economic and political challenges associated with the ban were more than those who did within the country. It is also possible that this larger percentage came from those who used VPN to hide their locations, if not from Nigerian's residents in other countries.

It is obvious that Twitter users were not worried about future possible economic issues as they did for the future political issues, which might occur as a result of the ban. For instance, a number of the users referenced possible gagging of the civic space during the forthcoming 2023 general elections. If all these emerged from the digital space, is there any linkage between the Internet Freedom Status of the country and the expressed rights, and the Economic Freedom Status¹⁴ and the rights of citizens? This report shows a 47.7% variation of the 2021 Internet Freedom Status with the rights. This signifies that 47.7% of the statuses could be explained from the rights expressed by the public. The fact that this is close to average is a sign that the nation's subsequent international ratings on general human rights, freedom of expression, and Internet freedom may be tied to the events before, during and after the ban placed on Twitter.

¹⁴ Economic Freedom Index, 2019. Accessed from: http://www.iberglobal.com/files/2019-1/economic_freedom_index_2019.pdf

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This report concludes that the ban on Twitter has deeply affected the political and economic rights of its users. Nigeria as a country laying emphasis on transiting to a digital economy as a strategy for reducing unemployment and raising millions of youth from poverty is already working against this objective with the ban on Twitter.

Although users discussed that their political rights were more curtailed than their economic rights as a result of the ban, thousands or millions of youth who use Twitter more for economic rather than political purposes have had their businesses negatively affected. This is true for millions of youth who advertise, engage customers and make business deals on Twitter.

Apart from legal and constitutional discussions of the ban, closing the civic space online further influences Nigeria's rating negatively on the Internet Freedom Index, which is just above average.

Since freedom of expression on social media platforms is one of the components for calculating the Internet Freedom Index of each country, the Twitter ban may significantly influence the next rating to be released and thereby affect how the country is perceived globally.

It also places questions on the empowerment and accountability responsibilities that must come from government to the citizens since citizens' active voice and participation in decision making should define empowerment and accountability in a democratic setting.

It is recommended that government should assess its commitment to the national digital economy objectives in the light of the Twitter ban. Also, the international profile of the country should be assessed and policies and activities that can further dent its image and rating be discontinued. It is recommended that government should invest in richer and inclusive participation of citizens in the digital space. Nigerians in the digital space are advised to promote media literacy both online and offline.



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