

# Social Media Regulation and Autocratisation in Nigeria under Buhari

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## Abstract

The digital revolution has exponentially transformed all facets of life, including governance systems across states and citizens' engagement in contemporary contexts. It has occasioned seamless platforms for the expression of dissents and critique of governments in demand for good governance and accountability. Social media is empowering previously voiceless citizens with the freedom to express themselves and participate in public discourse. Unfortunately, the disposition of the government in regulating the new media space goes beyond gagging the press to repression. The state is gradually sinking into the swamp of authoritarianism characterized by numerous reactionary complexes. This paper, therefore, attempts a polemical analysis of shrinking civic space and freedom of expression manifesting through the social media regulation bill as a major indicator of autocratisation in Nigeria. It also sees excessive regulation of social media as a policy which could, when merged with a suppressed judiciary and weak legislature, result in authoritarian rule in Nigeria. Secondary data sources were utilized for the study, which argues that disobedience to court orders and the use of state institutions to suppress political opposition contribute to the erosion of democracy in Nigeria. The paper contends that, despite the widespread penetration and usage of the internet and social media in Nigeria, the Buhari administration has adopted authoritarian practices while maintaining a stance on fundamental rights and citizens' participation in public affairs. Freedom of expression, speech and media independence are greatly under siege.

**Keywords:** Gagging the Press; Judicial Independence; Repression; Rule of Law

## Introduction

Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have occasioned a borderless world upon click of buttons using highly moderated technological innovations (Chiamogu, Obikeze, Chiamogu & Odikpo, 2021). Digitalisation and social networking in their spectres have heightened socio-cultural globalisation, especially in the spread of information, events and news regarding the social welfare of citizens and demands for accountability from

governments (Jimada, 2019; Olaniran & Williams, 2020). The spate of social media virality transmits both educative, informative, entertaining and menacing information in forms of audio-visuals and graphics to citizens and governments of developed and developing countries. Massively using new media via such social networking apps as Blogs, Instablogs, Facebook, Twitter(X), Instagram, Youtube, WhatsApp and Telegram among others have granted people relative vents for expression and association. Social media has ushered in a transformative era of instant and simultaneous communication, significantly awakening public consciousness in Nigeria, where people had long been confined to the limitations of heavily regulated traditional media. Studies have shown that social media sites are more politically diverse than face-to-face settings (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015) and as such offer spaces for marginalized groups to express their grievances (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013). This illustrates the pivotal role of social media in reshaping freedom of expression and media dynamics, profoundly influencing the quality and resilience of democracy across different societies.

The increasing tension between government attempts to regulate social media and the demand for freedom of expression in Nigeria poses a significant challenge to democratic values and the protection of individual rights. On one hand, the government argues that regulating social media is necessary to curb misinformation, hate speech and other forms of harmful content that could threaten national security and social harmony. On the other hand, critics argue that such regulations are often used to stifle dissent, limit public discourse and curtail the fundamental right to free speech. This ongoing conflict raises critical questions about the balance between security concerns and individual freedoms, especially in a country where social media has become a vital tool for political engagement, activism and communication.

The use of social media platforms for political expression has bolstered the study of socio-political communication and discussions (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Political expressions on social media thus enormously impact on socio-political behaviours in forms of electioneering campaigns, political mobilisation and electoral participation. The power of social media messages rests majorly on their ability to instantly and simultaneously reach a wide, diverse audience, possibly shaping their thinking and disposition as well as reaction to situations and events. While the public has overtime become accustomed to the regulation of conventional media like the Radio, Television and Print media establishments by government regulatory agencies, the idea of regulating social media; a space which many users consider to be the major avenue to air their unhindered views, is one that has generated a lot of mixed feelings, especially in countries where the press is under severe attacks as in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, discussions and attempts at social media restriction are not uncommon. Restriction of internet use and the social media in Nigeria dates to 2015, at the twilight of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's administration, when the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention etc.) was adopted in May 2015 (Afoah, n.d). The Law, among other things, addresses threats to cyberspaces, including internet usage and safety regarding prevention, prohibition and combating cybercrimes. The push for internet and social media censorship gained momentum in 2019 when President Muhammadu Buhari withheld assent to the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill, a progressive initiative aimed at safeguarding Nigerians' fundamental rights and online safety. The bill, which sought to address critical issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity, freedom of online expression, equitable access to digital technologies and protection against unlawful surveillance, was rejected on the grounds that it encompassed too many complex subjects without adequately addressing any of them in depth (Ekwealor, 2019; Paul, 2019). The situation was accentuated with heightened spate of social media restrictions by African states such as Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya (Chiefe, 2019). Thus, seemingly indicating the direction of government policy about internet rights and freedom

of speech, paragraph 13 of the 59<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary of Nigeria Speech (Buhari, 2019) unequivocally stated that: “Our attention is increasingly being focused on cybercrimes and the abuse of technology through hate speech and other divisive materials being propagated on social media. Whilst we uphold the constitutional rights of our people to freedom of expression and association, where the purported exercise of these rights infringes on the rights of other citizens or threatens to undermine our national security, we will take firm and decisive action”.

From reporting the Ebola outbreak in 2014 through #EndSars in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic to the unending Boko Haram insurgency, incessant attacks on police and other uniformed men formations across Southern Nigeria, farmers’-herders’ conflicts across geopolitical zones, successive governments and their agencies have been engrossed in management of social media contents which the governments considered hate speeches. The government considers calls and demands for accountability, responsibility and answerability from the government hate speeches, cyberbullying and radicalism by citizens and opposition involved in a campaign of calumny. Despite this growing body of work, studies often fail to connect the dots between social media regulation and the broader phenomenon of autocratisation, a process through which democratic spaces are systematically eroded. This study contributes to the literature by exploring the dialectics of shrinking civic space under Buhari’s administration, where the regulation of digital platforms serves as both a symptom and a driver of democratic backsliding.

By examining social media regulation as a lens to understand state-citizen relations, this study advances discussions on how governance frameworks interact with national security imperatives in a digital era. It situates Nigeria within a global discourse on internet rights while stressing the unique challenges posed by its political and social landscape. The findings provide insights into the balance between state control and citizens’ freedoms, emphasizing the urgent need for policies that safeguard both national security and democratic resilience.

### Theoretical Framework of Analysis

Freedom of expression is fundamental and supposedly inalienable, but citizens of states with populist leaders who have authoritarian tendencies tend to censor socio-political communication and discussions. The belief in minimal state control of media and publications to allow greater press freedom is popular but always in limited supply in states whose quality of democracy is creeping into authoritarianism. States practising constitutional democracies guarantee citizens’ right to express and share their views freely. Medium of communication notwithstanding, Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution bestows the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference to Nigerian citizens. The broad agreement that news media should be protected from government censorship rests on theories about the nature of human beings and their inherent rights (Graber, 2015). The underlying assumption is that all normal human beings are rational and have inalienable rights of self-determination, including choosing and monitoring their governments.

This paper adopted the authoritarian theory of mass communication as a framework of analysis to understand and appraise why state authorities fight dirty and draconian ways to control the media and socio-political communications. The authoritarian theory of mass communication is a normative theory where mass media is influenced and overpowered by state political authorities to forestall threats to national security and stability. This theory holds that the media must work in accordance with the wishes of the authorities but not under the direct control of the state (Bajracharya, 2018). It portends that the press and media shall not work independently from the state and that their works are susceptible to censorship. It is a theory explaining the functioning of the media and press under an authoritarian leadership where the media is subordinated to

the state authorities. Proponents of the theory (Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm all professors of communication) believe strongly that the distribution of state information might endanger national security and threaten state stability. They, therefore, maintain that the state is greater than individual rights and that the latter should be used to advance the state. In this instance, the press is a weapon of the powerful and is used to increase the power of the rulers. Discretion of political leadership, therefore, shapes power configuration and exercise of fundamental human rights. State authorities license, grant ambiguous rights, suppress media and harm journalists according to repressive measures. Invariably, this theory impairs the watchdog function and accountability demands of the media from the government. It grants garbs for censorship and regulation of socio-political communication and discussions such that information sharing and distribution on the social media are considered hate speech and punishable, thereby taking away the power to criticize the government, its work, decisions and policies from the media. Hence, the media is used as a weapon or an instrument to strengthen the power of the government against the citizens.

### **Social Media: Literature and Theory**

Social media are digital media platforms used for creating awareness, sharing views and social interaction between individuals and groups. They are used for information dissemination, political and product/brand marketing, knowledge sharing and entertainment purposes. Social and online/broadcast media are social networking apps that serve as the major instruments for enhancing the flow of information and relationships between individuals, organizations and governments (Prodanova & Looy, 2018). It consists of computer-based technologies for easy communication, interaction and collaboration (Mohammed, 2020). Social media are digitally mediated communication software that enables users to create, share and view content in publicly networked one-to-one, one-to-many, and/or many-to-many communications (Sinclair & Vogus, 2011; Hopkins, 2017).

What is more, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated contents.” This implies that interaction and instantaneity are basic features of social media. Web 2.0, as used in this context, defines the instantaneous interaction in social media usage. It explains why social media have become phenomenal in shaping political media and socio-political communications across societies in both developed and developing countries. Different social media apps and platforms include WhatsApp messenger, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter(X), YouTube, Pinterest, Snapchat, Academia, Tik Tok, Wechat, MySpace, etc. As such, Biagi (2013) opined that social media is ‘a two-way digital system’ of communication, education, entertainment and information dissemination. Sharing a similar position with the foregoing conceptualizations of social media, Carr and Hayes (2015, p.50) succinctly maintained that social media are “internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated contents and the perception of interaction with others”. In other words, an interactive system enables users to give feedback.

### **Social Media and Political Participation**

Men the world over, at all points in time, wish to have the freedom to do what they want to do. Freedom instigates the quest in man to be a free moral and political agent, which is inherent in man (Cohen-Almagor, 2017; Dierksmeier, 2019). According to Okoro and Odii (2013, p.76),

central to man's desire for freedom is "to be free to air his views and have access to information on activities, programmes and decisions of those who have the mandate to govern him". Of all kinds of freedom, D'Arcy (2017) posits that freedom of the press and expression which guarantee the right to 'freely' seek, obtain and air information concerning the leadership activities taking place in the state without fear or favour, are the most important ones in a democratic state. Unfortunately, these rights are under siege by elected leaders in Nigeria, who have made explicit attempts to silence critical media voices. Successive governments have issued strong and severe restrictions on press freedom, including the rising use of social media (Ndinojuo & Udoudo, 2018).

The conventional media in Nigeria, comprising journalists, reporters and media houses who engage in the business of news reporting, opinion sharing and information distribution are monitored, regulated and even controlled by the government and its agencies. The government has always considered the media a threat to national security because the information it publishes could be as lethal as informative and educative (Mohammed, 2020). The advent and skyrocketed use of social media has occasioned citizens' journalism, where trained and untrained persons now generate and distribute content seamlessly, spontaneously and simultaneously without moderation. Citizens now speak truth to power using social media and demand accountability while painting lucid pictures of government injustices in the public domain. Social media has increasingly become a key platform for political expression, civic engagement, and the promotion of accountability. The role of social media in facilitating political participation can be seen through its ability to enable individuals to express their political views, mobilise for causes, and demand accountability from governments (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015). According to their study, the ability of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (X), to allow users to share political opinions and engage in discussions has helped democratise political expression, making it more accessible to a wider audience. The use of social media in political participation is particularly valuable in contexts where traditional media may be controlled or censored, providing a space for alternative voices and narratives.

Social media regulation describes state intervention in the moderation, restriction and control of the use of social media platforms to guarantee national security and stability. It refers to any form of restriction and control of the operations of hi-tech (tele)communication giants and censorship of media contents on computer mediated software that hosts social networking and interactions. Social media regulations include the involvement of the government or its related agencies in the management and control of social media apps and platforms to ensure that they operate in line with a defined standard, norm or custom. Except for the Nigerian Cybercrime Act of 2015, there is no direct major structure and code for regulating social media in Nigeria.

The Nigerian Constitution supports internet and digital freedom within the framework of International Human Rights Law. This is in addition to Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 and the Criminal Code, 1990. The Cybercrime Act seeks to provide a regulatory framework for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution and punishment of crimes related to computer systems and networks, electronic communications, data and computer programmes, intellectual property and privacy rights. The closest regulation that applies to misinformation and posting of harmful contents on social media is section 24(1a), which states that any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter using a computer system or network that is grossly offensive, pornographic or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character or causes any such message or matter to be sent is guilty of an offence and is liable for prosecution. Subsection (1b) provides that any person who knowingly or intentionally spreads messages or other matter using a computer network system that h/she knows to be false to cause annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity,

hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent is guilty of the same offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment for a term of not more than three years or to both such fine and imprisonment.

The initial attempt to regulate Digital Rights and social media in Nigeria was through the Frivolous Petitions (Prohibition) Bill 2015, which sought to be the instrument to regulate social media. It was introduced in 2016 during the 8th National Assembly but did not scale the hurdles. Similarly, President Muhammedu Buhari declined assent to the Digital Rights Bill 2016, a law that ought to provide for the protection of human rights online, to protect internet users in Nigeria from infringement of their fundamental freedoms and to guarantee the application of human rights for users of digital platforms and/or digital media and related matters (Busari, 2019).

The Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019 is another attempt at regulating the social media landscape in Nigeria. The bill was designed to prevent the transmission of false statements or false declaration of facts with a view to counter the effects of such communications in Nigeria. It aimed at suppressing the financing, promotion and endorsement of false statements; hence it projected mechanisms of detection, control and safeguarding against misuse of online accounts with sanctions for defaulters. The bill seeks to address the issue of news and information commercialization by the press and more recently, owners and operators of online news media outlets such as social media pages, YouTube channels, websites, blogs and other social network platforms (Mohammed, 2020).

### Digital Rights and Freedom in Nigeria

The regulation of social media in Nigeria has a complex history marked by a tension between protecting national security and ensuring citizens' digital rights and freedoms. The Cybercrime Law of 2015 was a significant step in the evolution of social media regulation in Nigeria. This law was primarily aimed at combating cybercrime and ensuring the safety of Nigerians in cyberspace. However, critics argue that the law has been used to stifle freedom of expression and restrict the rights of individuals to engage in political discourse online (Fasina & Gana, 2019). The law includes provisions for punishing cybercrimes such as identity theft, online harassment and the dissemination of false information, but it has also been criticised for its potential to curtail freedom of expression.

In response to growing concerns over digital rights, the Nigerian government introduced the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill of 2019. This bill sought to establish a legal framework that guarantees digital rights, such as freedom of expression and access to information, in the digital space. It also emphasized the protection of individuals' privacy and the right to use social media without fear of censorship or persecution. Despite its promise, the bill has not yet been fully enacted, and there remains a significant gap in protecting digital freedoms in Nigeria (Ogunyemi, 2020).

Government responses to calls for accountability and perceived threats to national security have been marked by increasing regulation and control of social media platforms. The Nigerian government has occasionally shut down social media sites, such as Twitter, as part of its efforts to prevent the spread of content deemed to undermine national security. These actions have led to tensions between the government and digital rights advocates, who argue that the restrictions limit the ability of Nigerians to freely express their political views and hold their government accountable.

## Autocratization and Governance in Nigeria

Like many other concepts in political science, autocratization has received different definitions and interpretations from scholars. For Slovik (2012, p.20), autocracy describes “a regime that does not meet established criteria for democracy” while Brooker (2014, p.1) believes that it is a form of rule by other means than democracy. More comprehensively, Cassani and Tomini (2019, p.15) defined autocratization as “a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and that restricts the space for public contestation and political participation in the process of government selection”. For Luhrmann and Lindberg (2019), the concept of autocratization refers to a situation where there is a significant reduction in structural conditions for electoral democracy. It is sometimes used interchangeably with de-democratization, democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown and recession and setbacks to describe the declining state of democracy. Autocratization is thus a threat to democracy in both developed and developing countries. It, according to Pelke and Croissant (2021) refers to the decline in democratic qualities of any democratic regime that may result in the weakening or the breakdown of democracy as well as the recession of democratic characteristics in authoritarian regimes. Autocratization, therefore, is a process of regime change that describes the gradual decline in the quality of democracy of political regimes in such manners that institutions of governance and administration are susceptible to manipulations by the personality of political leadership. It, by implication, impairs due process of law, independence of the judiciary, press freedom and electoral participation.

In the context of Nigeria, the increasing trend of autocratisation has had significant implications for political freedoms and the media. The Nigerian government has frequently employed authoritarian policies to suppress dissent, particularly through the regulation of social media and the curtailment of press freedom. These actions have contributed to a shrinking political space, restricting the ability of opposition parties, civil society organisations and the public to express their views freely and openly (Sampson, 2018).

The impact of authoritarian policies on political freedoms and the media can be seen in the application of laws such as the Cybercrime Act of 2015 and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) regulations, which have been used to silence critical voices and control political discourse. Journalists and media outlets that challenge the government’s narrative have faced harassment, arrests and shutdowns. For instance, journalists have been detained for publishing stories critical of the government’s handling of political issues, fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship within the media landscape (Ugwueze & Ogbodo, 2020).

## Civic Space and Engagement in Nigeria

According to Agwuegbo (2021), civic space depicts “the political, legislative, social and economic environment that enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policymaking”. It provides latitude for citizens to enjoy constitutionally guaranteed freedom and pursue individual and collective interests without let and restrictions. Intrinsically, civic space paves the way for citizens to demand for accountability because it guards against the arbitrary use of state apparatuses of force against citizens. A dynamic and plural civic space allows smooth operations of the civil society organizations to advocate for citizens’ rights and demand accountability from the government.

Furthermore, social media has played a pivotal role in facilitating civic engagement by allowing individuals to organise protests, share political information and hold public officials accountable. Bekafigo and McBride (2013) observed how social media has become a platform for marginalised

groups to voice their grievances and advocate for their rights, especially in societies where these groups might otherwise be excluded from mainstream political discourse. For example, social media has been a critical tool in amplifying the voices of minority ethnic and religious groups, women's rights activists and youth movements in Nigeria. These platforms provide a space for individuals who might lack access to traditional political channels to participate in the political process and raise awareness about issues of public concern.

On the other hand, the civic space shrinks or closes when the government and its agencies become less accountable and responsive to citizens' demands. Under this condition, institutional guarantees of democracy are rendered subservient and incapacitated. State actors introduce repressive measures to clampdown on demands for accountability and fundamental human rights, starting with restrictive legislations, indulging in the overbroad application of existing laws and deliberate use of negative rhetoric against the civil society (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017). A long period of military rule in Nigeria shattered procedures for civic engagement and claims to fundamental human rights. It engendered the culture of executive ascendancy resulting in super Presidentialism, and centralized federalism, which repressed peoples' freedom and muzzled the press through decrees that normalized arbitrary use of force against civic engagement, disallowed dissent and shadowy government. The Nigerian executive arm of government is thus a depository of powers and governmental powers derived from the president or head of state. Might and character of political leadership are the major desiderata of socio-political relations. The law is for ordinary Nigerians who live in deprivation and oppression. Civic space engagement in Nigeria has been a function of social media activism. It grants citizens veils of anonymity to freely express their views, and articulate and coalesce narratives that were barely possible with the print media that was fully regulated and censored. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and other Liberty Organizations are engaged in perennial civil struggles against the governments to guard the democratic spaces.

### **Social Media Regulation and Autocratization in Nigeria**

Freedom of expression and independence of the media is constantly being regulated or strangled across the world. The press is under attack (Raman, 2020; Love, 2021). Democracy is declining worldwide; authoritarianism is gaining ground (Sloss, 2019). Granted that the world is still more democratic than it was in the 1970s and 80s, the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen has continued to dwindle and compared to the levels around 1990. The world is now in a third wave of autocratization with the affected number of citizens growing from 415 million in 2016 to 2.6 billion people (V-Dem Democracy Report, 2021). According to the V-Dem Report, autocratization follows a typical pattern where the ruling government first attacks the media and civil society and polarizes the society by disrespecting opponents and spreading false information to undermine elections.

Successive Nigerian governments had through unpopular policies and acts of unresponsiveness attracted public outcry and criticisms that were expressed on social media platforms owing to the level of censorship meted out to the conventional media. The passage and signing of the Freedom of Information Act notwithstanding, the people of Nigeria have continued to live in a world of gagged press and regulated freedom of expression largely because the executive arm of successive governments have assumed enormous powers from centralized federalism that is giving rise to a very strong presidential democracy. The executive arm of the government at the centre depending upon the personality of political leadership is the epicentre of power division and rule of law in Nigeria (Kalu, 2018). The character of political leadership subsumed in the presidency shapes and determines the functioning of both the legislature and the judiciary.

Democracy preaches shadowy government, freedom of expression and independent press but the personality of leadership is a factor that propels quality of democracy where the institutional guarantees are unstable and wavy. Unfortunately, every leader does not tolerate opposition and criticism at the same level. Democratically elected leaders who share autocratic tendencies or have military training do not easily subscribe and observe democratic ethos. The press and freedom of expression have witnessed unrelenting attacks since the dawn of the Fourth Republic especially under Presidents Obasanjo and Buhari.

In Nigeria, the advent of the new media has revolutionized processes of social and political communications (Suntai & Targema, 2017). It expanded the frontiers of political participation and social mobilization while creating vistas for freedom of expression and widening democratic spaces. Social media and online broadcasting provided platforms for simultaneous and seamless interactions between the masses and the government. It increased the volume of information at the disposal of the masses. As internet penetration increases with greater broadband development and smartphone usage, more Nigerians access the internet and subscribe to social media sites. Currently, at a record 50% internet penetration, 187.9 million Nigerians have mobile connections with 33 million social media subscriptions. Social media has indeed revolutionized media and communication in Nigeria (Kemp, 2021). The most used social media platforms in Nigeria are WhatsApp with 93%, Facebook (86.2%), YouTube (81.6%) and Instagram (73.1%) (Gilbert, 2021). Virtually every aspect of our lives has joined social media because it is easier, seamless, instantaneous, interactive and cheaper. Social media has largely changed the pattern of social relations and civic engagement while offering sustainable opportunities for gathering and sharing of news items, communication with audiences and advocacy for change. Social media has provided platforms for citizens-state interaction in the public sphere. It provides higher levels of participation for younger people and an avenue for women who have not been very active and vocal with a voice to demand for accountability.

The Buhari administration has since inauguration in 2015 demonstrated intolerance to opposition and criticism by its persistent attempts at restricting the use of social media. The government believes that social media increases the spread of fake news, hate speeches, extremism, and organized protests leading to uncontrollable unrest (Bakare, 2020; Busari, 2019). Hence, it is determined to establish restrictive policies on the operation and use of social media in Nigeria. The government illegally uses the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 to criminalize online speeches and detain journalists, critics and online dissidents. The freedom of expression for citizens has been challenged with this law and citizens are experiencing the impact of undemocratic interpretations of sections of the law. Political office holders and powerful government officials have exploited the law to attack citizens who share critical views or general criticisms of their (government officials) actions on social media. The denial of assent to the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill 2016 and subsequent introduction of the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019 are clear indications of the government commitment to close the online civic space, limit press freedom and strangulate critical opposition. Many journalists, social media users and activists have been arrested, incarcerated and killed between 2016 and now under the Cybercrime Act for their online posts.

Obnoxiously and in flagrant drive to gag, muzzle and strangulate free speech, media freedom and close the online civic space without known legislations, the Buhari administration clamped down on the operations of Twitter, a microblogging and social networking site in Nigeria on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2021. Eventually, the government started regulation of social media in Nigeria through sanctions wherein it accused Twitter of vicarious liability for destruction of government properties and wanton violence during the #EndSars protest. Clearly, Twitter like other social media apps

provide platforms for Nigerian online users to express their grievances, personal and collective views about government policies and programmes constitute veritable medium for the circulation and spreading of narratives that easily generate public sympathy against government injustices (Chiamogu et al, 2021). The suspension of the operations of Twitter was a calculated measure to forestall ongoing mobilization by #RevolutionNow group for the June 12 protest bad governance in Nigeria. The government ceased the opportunity of Twitter's deletion of President Buhari's tweet against the Igbos to execute a planned action designed to avoid a repeat of #EndSars Protest that would have gone out of proportion owing to widespread violent conflicts and resort to self-help by many citizens and groups who were fed up with the inabilities of the government to provide good governance in Nigeria.

Clearly, the incapacitation of the state started with the capture and domination, by the executive arm of the government, of legislative and judicial powers in such manners that the National Assembly became a rubber stamp that passes every action while the courts are lameducked into toothless bulldogs. Court decisions are obeyed when in line with government plans. The state is indeed in private hands and is being used for personal and group goals. Civil societies are shouting and threatening court actions that do not generate freedom at the wake of resultant autocracy. Nigerians are back to square one: widespread insecurity, chains of abject poverty, deprivation and gross violation of basic freedom are the rules.

### Shrinking Civic Space and Democratic Erosion in Nigeria

The shrinking of civic space in Nigeria is a troubling sign of democratic erosion, where restrictions on freedom of expression, political participation and civil society activism have become more pronounced. According to Freedom House (2020), these restrictions are part of a broader trend of democratic backsliding, where governments tighten control over political opposition, independent media and civil society organisations. In Nigeria, this erosion has been particularly evident in the government's response to protests and calls for social change, such as the #EndSARS movement, which demanded an end to police brutality.

The Nigerian government has frequently responded to such movements by cracking down on protesters, blocking social media platforms and passing laws that limit the ability of individuals to freely express their views. These actions not only undermine democratic values but also signal a broader decline in the quality of governance and respect for human rights. The increase in restrictions on freedom of expression and political participation, coupled with growing state surveillance, indicates that Nigeria is on the path of democratic erosion, as the government's attempts to consolidate power limit the public's ability to hold the government accountable (Freedom House, 2020).

### Conclusion

Massive internet and social media penetration and usage have overwhelmingly changed media communications in Nigeria. It, amongst other things, marked citizen journalism without moderation at the third wave of autocratization. Many democratically elected governments have become rather authoritarian while maintaining periodic conduct of elections that are devoid of rights and citizens participation in spiralling decline of democratic ethos. Freedom of expression, speech and media independence are greatly under siege. Governments, especially the present Muhammadu Buhari administration with dictatorial tendencies have repressed people's freedoms; going beyond simply shutting down dissent to killing civilians, journalists, and political opponents who dare express views not in conformity with those of the government. Without legislative instruments, sanctions are placed on social media users and operators to clampdown critical

opposition, dissent and close the civic space. The government is afraid of criticisms. The civil society organizations speak at their perils and high risk of attacks. Dissenting views are labelled hate speeches but hate actions and injustices from state authorities abound. The presidency has captured the state and is using the institutions of governance against the rule of law and the citizens. Judicial and legislative powers are suppressed to the points of being subservient to the executive organ. There are no safeguards because the institutional guarantees of democracy are collapsing. The executive arm of the government is fast becoming the repository of powers with the whims and caprices of the presidency turning the rules.

Invariably, suppression of the judiciary by blatant disobedience to court decisions does not promote democratic governance. The executive arm of the government has assumed enormous powers whose abuse is giving rise to calculated destruction of other arms and institutions of electoral democracy. The quality of Nigerian democracy is fast creeping into autocracy with unprecedented attacks on basic human rights of free speech and media freedom.

We therefore recommend that civil society organizations should prevail on President Muhammadu Buhari to assent to the Digital Rights and Internet Freedom Bill that was passed in 2016 to safeguard the online civic space. We also urge President Buhari to conform to the principle of federal character in resources distribution while allowing greater citizens' participation in public affairs.

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