



## EXAMINING FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S SUSPENSION OF TWITTER

EZINWA Vincent Chi, PhD

General Studies Division, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Agbani, Enugu.

Email: ezivinchi@yahoo.com phone: 0868408448

### Abstract

*This paper examined the Federal Government's suspension of Micro-blogging platform, Twitter, from operating in Nigeria. The suspension was in response to Twitters' decision on Wednesday June 2, 2021, to delete a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari in which he threatened to threat those attacking security agencies "with the language they understand" This is just as another social media platform, Facebook, has also on Friday, June 4, 2021, joined Twitter in deleting president Buhari's tweet. Both Twitter and Facebook considered president Buhari's tweet on Tuesday June 1, 2021, as offensive for violating their community standards against inciting violence. However, in its response, the Federal Government condemned Twitter's removal of president Buhari's tweet, saying that the platform's mission in Nigeria was suspicious. Minister of information, Lai Mohammed (2021, p.5) said "Twitter rules is not universal, saying the president's tweet did not in any way incite violence". Reacting to the suspension of Twitter in Nigeria, the main opposition party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), rejected what is called the unwarranted suspension of the social media platform, Twitter, by President Muhammadu Buhari led Federal Government, describing it as a draconian action and a slide towards a fascist region in the recent history of Nigeria. The study adopted the descriptive methodology. It drew upon primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include oral information and testimonies. Newspapers and magazines reports were also used in conjunction with official records in government publications. Secondary sources include relevant books. The researcher also made use of direct observation method. All the information so gathered were subjected to historical examination.*

**Keywords:** Buhari led administration, suspension, Twitter, Nigeria.

### Introduction

In the recent history of Nigeria, the issue of the Federal Government's suspension of the micro-blogging platform, Twitter, from operating in Nigeria was so burdensome, oppressive, wearisome, and weighty to the Nigerian people. The unfriendly and un-business-like action was coming after a sweet and a video from president Muhammadu Buhari, the Nigeria's No 1 citizen was deleted. According to Twitter (2021, p.10) the reason for the deletion was because those contents violated their term of use or simply put, the community guidelines. President Buhari's cold war with Twitter ensured because the President had warned that all those who wanted the destruction of the system would soon have the shock of their lives, as he aptly pointed out "those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand. We are going to be very hard sooner than later "(Casmir Igbokwe, 2021, p.31).



For threatening war and promoting violence, Twitter removed the post. The micro-blogging giant had similarly removed the post of Donald Trump when he was the president of the United States, currently, the same Trump is on suspension from Facebook until 2023. Heavens have not fallen. But for Nigeria, removal of Buhari's post was sacrilegious, blasphemous, and disrespectful. In a show of brute force and dictatorship, the information ministers, Lai Mohammed (2021, p.31) quickly issued a statement denouncing Twitter. He followed up by announcing a ban on Twitter operations in Nigeria. The Attorney – General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Abubakar Malami (2021, p.31) added his voice by threatening to prosecute any Nigerian found violating the ban.

Unfortunately, Twitter did not ban Buhari. It simply removed a post it considered offensive. For that reason, all Nigerians have been subjected to breach of their freedom to access information for no justifiable reason. The implications are that many Nigerian business men and women, especially, the youthful population have been banned from using the Twitter platform that enables them to reach millions of people and business deals worldwide. For many enlightened and civilized Nigerians, it was a show of mockery, sabotage, repellent, deterrent and impediment that turn-off their business partners. It is a reflection of military dictatorship which, incidentally, rationalize their actions by tying them to national interest which they consider superior to the rule of law. (Igbokwe, 2021, p.31).

The threat to Biafra agitators in Twitter that caused his suspension is a pointer of reminding the people of their traumatic, painful and sorrowful past, in the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970, over three million Igbo perished. Some were maimed, crippled, impaired, incapacitated, mutilated and marginalized for life after the war, the Yakubu Gowon military administration promised to effect rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation in the South East. The Gowon promise was a lip-service and mere rhetoric, rather than fulfilled the promise of the three “Rs” to the Eastern region. The Federal Government has constantly reminded the region that it is a conquered territory. It was unfortunate and wrong for President Buhari to remind the Easterners the misery of bloodshed, ethnocide, massacre and pogrom they witnessed as a people and ethno-group before, during and after the civil war. It is grievous, painful, pitiful and outrageous to humanity. Today, there is tension in the South East as many innocent youths have been murdered in the name of hunting the “unknown gunmen”. Many Easterners now dread travelling to their country homes, in some places, burials are conducted via Zoom so that people can participate without risking their lives by traveling. As Igbokwe (2021, p.21) sadly pointed out “No doubt, the killing of security men in the South East by the so-called unknown gunmen is condemnable, just as the kidnapping and killing of students and travellers in the other parts of the country. No place is safe anymore in Nigeria. People are traumatized, disturbed, and wounded. The



solution is not to isolate the South East and remind them their traumatized past. It is not in issuing threats upon threats, national healing and dialogue is needed by Nigerian leaders with a patriotic spirit to calm the fretful and marginalized people seeking for fairness and justice in their father land. They are in position to initiate policies that will change the fortunes of the diverse ethnic groups for good by restructuring Nigeria along the path of true Federalism so that all the geo-political zones in Nigeria's Federal System should begin to operate competitively and healthily. The Nigerian presidency and those in other branch of leadership positions in the country have the power and authority to rescue the country from joining the league of failed states. Banning Twitter and Facebook makes the Federal Government foolish, empty, clawless and ignorant. It also makes the economic and political advices of the president unanalytical and unscholarly to the deep problems facing the Giant of African. Likewise, prosecuting Nigerians that disobey the ban order is an idle, flimsy and superficial talk that do not hold water. The Federal Government ban on Twitter is to the disadvantage of Nigerian business creativity and innovation. This is because the youthful population of Nigeria is using the platform of Twitter and Facebook to enhance their business ingenuity, genius, inventiveness, resourcefulness and skills. Twitter and Facebook platform makes the world a global village for people to earn successful living with one another.

### **Abuse, Anger and the Implications as the Federal Government Suspends Twitter in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria.**

It was outrage, abuse, insult and indignation as the government suspends Twitter. Facebook joins face off with government, deletes Buhari post too. Following the suspension of Twitter by the Federal Government, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) condemned the "illegal and unconstitutional suspension of Twitter's operations in Nigeria and called on the Buhari led administration to immediately rescind the suspension within 48 hours or face legal action. SERAP in a statement by its deputy director, Kolawole Oluwadaze (2021, p.5) said "The suspension of Twitter in Nigeria was a blatant violation of Nigerians rights to freedom of expression and access to information. The suspension has the character of collective punishment and was contrary to Nigeria's International obligations. The suspension of Twitter in Nigeria was an offence because Twitter in Nigeria would deny Nigerians access to information, and disrupt the free exchange of ideas and the ability of individuals to connect with one another and associate peacefully on matters of shared concern. It would also seriously undermine the ability of Nigerians to promote transparency and accountability in the country and to participate in their own Government. Reacting to the suspension, SERAP also call on the Nigerian authorities to guarantee the conditionality and internationally recognized human rights of Nigerians including online deletion of President Buhari's tweets should never be used as a



pretext to suppress the civic space and undermine Nigerians, Fundamental Human rights. (Oluwadare, K, 2021, p.5).

Furthermore, most Information and Communications Technology, (ICT) professionals who reacted to Federal Government suspension of Twitter, described it as a decision made without deep knowledge of technology's dynamism. They also explained that the decision could undermine the economic boost technology gives the country by way of consistently strengthening the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The irony of this twitter suspension is that it gives Nigeria a bad name and image abroad. It is embarrassing because the world would be underrating, disparaging, and undervaluing the Nigerian State. The suspension of Twitter by the Government came as a rude shock because of the youthful population of Nigeria that make frequent use of Twitter. The suspension of Twitter by the Government is a misplaced priority, Twitter is not a threat to Nigeria's co-existence. Twitter is not more harmful than any social media. What is threatening Nigeria as a country in recent time is insecurity, poverty, unemployment and economic meltdown, not Twitter. Is Twitter responsible for Boko Haram and killer herdsmen chasing farmers from their farmland?

Meanwhile, the Global Amnesty Watch, (GAW) (2021, p.5) described the decision of the Federal Government to suspend the operation of Twitter in Nigeria as the height of impunity and intolerance to criticisms. Comrade Terrence Kuanum (2021, p.5) a staff of GAW argued that the action of President Buhari had exposed the Government's intolerance to opposing views and actions. Twitter did not come to Nigeria because of President Buhari, so his decision to suspend the operation of Twitter in Nigeria is undemocratic. What Twitter did by deleting his post was to try to prevent the crisis he was trying to provoke in Nigeria by the statement he was making instead of offering leadership to end the crisis.

Buhari's suspension of Twitter operation in Nigeria in the recent time means that he has taken the crisis further across the borders to start to engaging in crisis with international organizations and nations across the world where millions of Nigerians are plying their trade. And if these relationships are affected, obviously the implications are that they are going to also affect millions of Nigerians. The ban on Twitter affects Nigerians business community because they are part of global citizenry. The Federal Government ban on Twitter was a last dictatorial move of a failing Government, which is trying to silence everyone who point out that they are failing.

According to Obioha, R (2021, p.12) the ban on Twitter by the Federal Government over deleting President Buhari tweets on secessionists was unnecessary. Apart from being illegal, the Government's action was unconstitutional, immoral and done in a bad faith.



What the administration has done was an attack on free speech and freedom of information. The ban will send wrong signals to foreign investors, countries and tourists that all is not well with the Nigerian state. In a period of heightened insecurity, ethnic tensions and other wars. Adding the Twitter war will be too much for the administration. And such wars and conflicts on many fronts are difficult for the Government to win all without causing huge injury, abuse, damage and harm to itself and its citizenry in times of insecurity. The trauma, insult and blackmail this action has brought to Nigeria with the suspension of Twitter is destructive, harmful and detrimental to the business Community in Nigeria and abroad. The Government would have used other fine ways to seek for redress instead of outright ban slammed on Twitter. The Government did not exhaust other channels of diplomatic methods to redress the issue with Twitter before banning the media outfit with the ill-conceived and ill-advised action, to even think of prosecuting high-profile Nigerians using Twitter account is also illegal. The Government action has been condemned by many Nigerians and foreign Government, such as the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), Canada, Norway, Ireland and European Union (EU) Delegation to Nigeria. Also, the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Newspapers Proprietors' Associations of Nigeria (NPAN), Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) and International Press Institute (IPI) have all condemned the ban (Obioha, R, 2021, p.12).

As Obioha aptly pointed out, "If the Government has any issue with Twitter, there are other ways, including due process, to seek for redress instead of rushing to ban the social media outlet, through which many Nigerians sell their products and services. The Government must be aware that Twitter is a global social media platform with its rules and regulations which all subscribers, including president Buhari must obey. I hope that the government is not expressing its anger over Twitter having its African office in Ghana instead of having it in Nigeria. One of the reasons that made twitter to have its office in Ghana is that Ghana is more democratic and it is a good promoter of free speech and good governance than Nigeria. Most foreign countries and institutions will prefer to do business with Ghana than Nigerian for obvious reasons". (Obioha 2021, p.12).

Government ban on Twitter has seriously jeopardize, endanger, and threaten the ease, composure, freedom, liberty and peace of mind of doing business in Nigeria. Twitter ban in Nigerian has serious economic and political implications. As Bala Zaka (2021, p.27) rightly pointed out, the signal it sends to international investment should be more worrisome to the government. They should have engaged twitter diplomatically. Twitter is a global communication platform that connects people from different parts of the world economically, politically and socially. When you realize the influence this has on the business world, you would not want to take any action against the platform hastily. But that is what Nigeria has just done, which will go a long way to affect the confidence in the



market. People are already wary of coming to Nigeria to do business owing to rising insecurity. The twitter ban has further worsened the situation. The government has many alternative options to explore in its dialogue with the platform. But banning has only portrayed the country as intolerant of others opinion (Bala Zala 2021, p.27).

Furthermore, Teniola (2021, p.27), Nigeria Coordinator, Alliance for Affordable Internet, explains that the suspension of twitter by the Federal Government may not have a direct impact on the telecoms industry but would hurt the MSMES that need daily or constant access to reach the market. The best guess is that an opportunity exists for MSMES to the tune of possibly \$1.2 billion per year, which inevitably creates new wealth, productivity and youth empowerment. So as Twitter is a global digital communication and content platform, it is a veritable tool to diversify the Nigerian economy and provide the youth a future to build their lives in a productive manner. It is evident that the longer the suspension of Twitter continues the more the government of Nigeria will lose potential tax income.

Meanwhile, Jeffrey Conroy Krutz (2021, p.27) argued that Nigeria's decision to suspend twitter indefinitely could backfire for the government and cost the country economically in terms of new investments into its technology sector. To put it right, Nigerians has been among the best performing African countries in attracting investments for technology start up business. The twitter ban could threaten that status and make business suffer. Twitter ban will keep investors away. Global tech companies that want to have a presence in Africa are likely to look at a place like Ghana rather than a place like Nigeria. Clearly, the registration is a pretext to regulation. Netbocks, an internet watch dog (2021, p.12) argued that the Federal Government Twitter ban has cost the country ₦6billion since the ban come into effect three days ago. A single-day total internet outage would cost Nigeria ₦48,596 billion economic value while Nigeria will lose ₦10,885 billion per day if WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter are all shut down.

### **Twitter Ban: Examining the other side of the coin**

Twitter Ban is a challenge for Nigeria's IT professionals and practitioners to come up with an alternative platform which is home grown. According to Adeyemi (2021, p.5) not only does Nigeria have seasons IT professionals within the country but also outside the country who work and desire similar platforms. The Federal Government through meaningful cooperation with the private sector should harness, channel, mobilize and utilize all relevant resources to make it work. Also, the right enabling environment must be provided and such a platform should be free of Government control and must be given a free hand to operate. (Adeyemi, 2021, p.5).



Unfortunately, for now, some individual Nigerians who work for Twitter as consultants' operators and service providers will definitely lose their jobs which presently one may not be able to quantify in financial terms.

### **Conclusion**

The decision of the Buhari-led administration to ban Twitter in the recent history of Nigeria would appear to have far reaching political, economic, social and foreign diplomatic implications. The Federal Government ban on Twitter appeared too hasty without much consideration. The ban, no doubt, will definitely have negative impact on the Nigerian economy and on some individuals. Twitter remains the foremost source of information dissemination globally. Furthermore, it is one of the foremost sources of advertisements for a wide range of professionals. A lot of calls for grants, scholarship advertisements etc. are made through twitter. The global business is highly interconnected through the platform, as such, banning of Twitter will have negative impact on business. It is also an excellent source of breaking news which in short or medium term will make Nigerians and the news media not to be abreast of breaking news. No matter what the Buhari led administration give as reasons for the unwarranted ban of Twitter in Nigeria, the reality is that the government has deprived millions of Nigerians from using Twitter, the medium through which they carry out their trades and business. And this is a country which has become the poverty capital of the world and where government is daily struggling to lift millions of its citizens out of poverty and unemployment. Any Government's actions that is harmful to its citizens is not worth any consideration at all; like other well-meaning Nigerians and our foreign partners and friends have counsel the Government. The Government is advised to lift the ban on Twitter forthwith. It will manifest that the former military leader now in a democratic dispensation has a listening ear and that it cares to respect the tenets of democracy and the wish of the people in times of deep need and well-being.

### **Recommendations**

This paper has come forth with the following recommendations concerning Federal Government's suspension of Twitter in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria.

1. This paper has recommended that the Federal Government ban on Twitter was not only ill-advised, it was a draconian and should be reversed forthwith. This is because the economic implications of the ban are enormous, colossal and disgraceful to the Government. There are about 40 million Twitter users in Nigeria. Many of these Nigerians have been shut out of business. It has been estimated that Nigeria loses about ₦2.1 billion everyday on account of the ban. One way or the other, investors' confidence may have been affected.



2. The paper also points out that schools and media organizations depend on Twitter to access and disseminate information. The suspension of Twitter in Nigeria has denied them access to information which is against many international conventions, such as, Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and Article 19 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The ban of Twitter is also against Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution. That section states that every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. This is why many Nigerians and groups have condemned the ban. The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) and 176 other concerned Nigerians went a step further by dragging the Federal Government to the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) court of justice in Abuja. In the suit, SERAP and the concerned Nigerians noted that the "Suspension of Twitter is aimed at intimidating and stopping Nigerians from using Twitter and other social media platforms to access government policies, expose corruption, and criticize acts of official impunity by the agents of the Federal Government.
3. The paper also advises that the ruling class in Nigeria should be humble enough to do what the majority of their people want. They should stop behaving like dictators, tyrants and despots. There is a need for intelligent and wise people advising the president to give him the correct and right advice.
4. The paper also recommends that if the Government has any grouse with Twitter, let it complain to the organization and resolve the matter amicably without resorting to applying undue force. No matter the government's reason for the unwanted ban. Any government's action that is harmful to its citizens is not worthy of any consideration at all. The government should lift the ban on Twitter forthwith before the negative effect begin to impact on the government and its citizenry.
5. This paper also recommends that the Federal Government should use the Biafra/Twitter War" as a lesson and look for ways to make amends, the Federal Government should not dismiss the early warning signals to crisis and possible breakup of Nigeria. Because before any crisis happens there are early warning signals which wise leaders can use to identify the causes of the crisis to prevent them before they happen. A multi-ethnic and religious country like Nigeria need leaders that can decipher and figure out the mind-set of the diverse cultures and peoples to hastily unfold and unravel their aspirations and peacefully check their agitations so that the people can live in peace and harmony. This means that the President, Governors, National Assembly members and other leaders of the country need to be honest to





come down from their “high horses” to consult the leaders and the people at the grassroots to examine their problems and genuinely proffer solutions to it. So that justice, peace and development will be sustained in the country.

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