

Digital Rights, Civic Space, and the Twitter Ban in Nigeria: An Evaluation of Government Censorship, Online Freedoms, and the Politics of Internet Shutdowns

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ABSTRACT

On 5 June 2021, the Nigerian government suspended nationwide access to Twitter, a move that sparked widespread domestic concern and strong international criticism from human rights organisations, foreign governments, and civil society actors. The suspension disrupted millions of users who relied on the platform for communication, business, news dissemination, and civic engagement, and it raised urgent questions about the limits of state authority in digital spaces. This paper examines the Twitter ban through the lens of digital rights and civic space and analyses it using State Control Theory as its theoretical framework. It focuses on the government's official justification for the ban, the legal and constitutional context in which the directive was issued, and the wider social and political consequences that followed. Using qualitative document analysis and a systematic review of existing scholarly literature, the study finds that the suspension went beyond regulatory enforcement and reflected a calculated exercise of state Power against an online platform associated with civil society resistance. The paper recommends comprehensive digital rights legislation, restoration of unrestricted platform access, and stronger institutional mechanisms to guarantee civil society participation in digital policy governance.

Keywords: Twitter ban, digital rights, civic space, internet shutdown, freedom of expression

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The Nigerian Journal of Business and Social Sciences, Volume 13, 2026 (Special Issue)
A Journal of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria
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1. INTRODUCTION

The governance of digital platforms has become One of the most contested areas of public policy in the twenty-first century. As internet access deepens across Africa and the Global South, governments have increasingly moved to assert authority over the online spaces where citizens communicate, organise, and engage in political life. The tension between state authority and digital freedom is not merely technical; it is fundamentally political. It raises deeper questions about who controls public discourse, what tools citizens are allowed to use to challenge Power, and how far state authority extends in the digital age. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country and One of its most active social media markets, provides a vital case for examining these questions. The country had approximately 33-40 million Twitter users by 2021, many of whom used the platform for news, business, professional networking, and political communication. Twitter had become structurally embedded in Nigerian civic life, most visibly during the #EndSARS protests of October 2020, when activists used it to document police brutality, coordinate nationwide demonstrations, and raise funds internationally. The platform's association with organised civic resistance made it politically significant in the eyes of both citizens and government officials. Digital rights refer to the entitlements that individuals hold in digital environments, including the right to access the internet, to express opinions online, to receive and share information, and to organise collectively through digital tools. These rights are understood as extensions of civil and political rights guaranteed under international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both of which Nigeria has ratified (Kettemann, 2020). The United Nations Human Rights Council has affirmed repeatedly that rights applicable offline must be equally protected online, and that governments restricting internet access must demonstrate that such restrictions are lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Civic space, in its digital dimension, refers to the online environments where citizens and civil society can engage in public discourse, hold governments accountable, and participate in democratic processes without fear of interference or punishment. Social media platforms play a central role in the digital civic space, particularly among young Nigerians, who use them to access political information, coordinate protests, and amplify marginalised voices. When governments block or restrict such platforms, they do not merely inconvenience users; they shrink the practical space in which democracy functions (CIVICUS, 2022). Government censorship of digital platforms refers to the deliberate restriction or prohibition of access to online services through state directives issued to telecommunications and internet service providers. Unlike the regulation of broadcast media, which operates under established licensing frameworks, censorship of digital platforms in Nigeria has largely proceeded without clear statutory authority or judicial authorisation. The Twitter ban of 2021 illustrates this pattern sharply. The ban was announced without prior court order, legislative approval, or public consultation. The Minister of Information and Culture stated that Twitter had been suspended because of its use for activities that could undermine Nigeria's corporate existence, a vague justification that legal scholars quickly challenged as insufficient to override constitutional free-expression guarantees.

The politics of internet shutdowns in Africa have been extensively documented by organisations such as Access Now and NetBlocks. Between 2015 and 2022, more than 180 deliberate internet disruptions were recorded across the continent, clustering around elections, protests, and periods of political sensitivity (Access Now, 2022). Scholars have argued that these shutdowns serve primarily as tools of political management rather than genuine security enforcement (Feldstein, 2019). Nigeria's decision to ban One specific platform rather than shut down the internet broadly

represents a targeted form of censorship with distinct legal and political implications. The historical trigger for the Twitter ban was the government's reaction to the deletion of President Muhammadu Buhari's tweet on 2 June 2021. Twitter removed the tweet for violating its policies on abusive content. Two days later, the Federal Government ordered the nationwide suspension of the platform. This sequence of events must be understood against the background of #EndSARS: the government had grown openly hostile to social media in the months following the protests, and the deletion of the presidential tweet provided the political justification it needed to act. The ban lasted seven months, from June to December 2021, making it One of the longest targeted platform bans in African history. Despite a growing body of literature on internet shutdowns and digital rights in Africa, a significant gap remains at the intersection of these themes in the Nigerian context. Studies have documented the frequency and economic costs of internet disruptions but have given comparatively less attention to the constitutional dimensions of platform-specific bans, the legal accountability gaps they expose, and their long-term consequences for democratic consolidation. This study addresses that gap by providing a detailed analytical account of the Twitter ban as a case of state censorship, a constitutional violation, and the suppression of civic space.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sets out the conceptual framework, defining digital rights and civic space. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, applying State Control Theory to the analysis. Section 4 reviews the existing literature. Section 5 details the methodology. Section 6 presents findings and discussion across three sub-themes: the legal and constitutional dimensions of the ban, its social and political effects, and its implications for digital rights and democratic governance. Section 7 offers conclusions and recommendations.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DIGITAL RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE

Digital rights are the rights individuals have to access, use, and communicate through digital technologies without unjustified restrictions or government interference. These rights are widely understood as extensions of fundamental rights recognised in international human rights law, including the rights to freedom of expression, access to information, privacy, and peaceful assembly (Kettemann, 2020). In democratic societies, digital rights function as essential enablers of civic participation. They allow citizens to access information, engage in public debate, organise politically, and scrutinise the exercise of public Power. When states restrict digital rights without lawful justification, they undermine the practical conditions on which democratic life depends.

Civic space describes the legal, political, and social environment in which citizens and civil society organisations can safely and freely participate in public life, speaking, assembling, and organising without fear of reprisal (CIVICUS, 2022). Digital civic space has grown in strategic importance as political activity, protest coordination, accountability journalism, and public discourse increasingly move online. In Nigeria, Twitter became a central component of digital civic space, particularly after the #EndSARS movement demonstrated the platform's capacity to sustain large-scale, decentralised political mobilisation across a geographically diverse country. When governments block specific platforms or shut down the internet, they directly narrow civic space. Such actions deprive citizens of tools for accessing information, communicating, and participating in public life. Scholars have described platform bans and internet shutdowns as instruments through which states exercise control over digital infrastructure to suppress political opposition and constrain civil society (Feldstein, 2019). The Twitter ban in Nigeria is examined through this lens throughout the paper, with State Control Theory providing the overarching theoretical framework for interpreting the government's motivations and actions.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STATE CONTROL THEORY

3.1 Meaning and Origins

State Control Theory is a framework in political science and public administration that explains states' tendency to seek authority over social, economic, and communicative spaces within their territorial boundaries. The theory holds that states, by their nature, pursue mechanisms of control over populations, resources, and information to maintain order, secure political legitimacy, and manage threats to the governing authority. Its intellectual roots lie in the work of scholars such as Max Weber, who argued that the modern state is defined by its claim to a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory, and Antonio Gramsci, who extended the analysis of state Power to include cultural and communicative domination. In its contemporary applications, State Control Theory has been extended beyond physical coercion to examine how states seek to control information flows, public discourse, and, increasingly, digital infrastructure. In the digital age, State Control Theory has been adapted by scholars to account for how governments use technology, regulation, and platform governance to extend state authority into online spaces. This updated version of the theory recognises that the internet, while initially designed as a decentralised and censorship-resistant network, has become a site of intense competition between state actors seeking control and citizens seeking freedom. Governments have developed a range of tools for exercising digital control, including internet shutdowns, platform blocks, data surveillance, content filtering, and the coercive regulation of private technology companies. State Control Theory provides a coherent framework for understanding why governments adopt these tools and what political functions they serve.

3.2 Core Tenets

State Control Theory rests on several core tenets that are directly relevant to this study. The first tenet is that states seek to maximise their authority over communication and information within their borders. Historically, this impulse manifested in state control of broadcast media, newspapers, and postal services. In the digital era, the same impulse drives governments to regulate, restrict, or shut down online platforms that they perceive as threats to their authority or as tools of political opposition. The Nigerian government's decision to ban Twitter, a platform it associated with the #EndSARS protests and the deletion of a presidential post, clearly reflects this tenet. The second tenet is that states use legal frameworks selectively to legitimise control. When formal legal authority exists for a given restriction, states invoke it. When it does not, states may act first and seek legal cover retroactively, or may act without legal justification and rely on their coercive capacity to prevent accountability. The Twitter ban exemplifies this tenet: the government issued the ban without clear statutory authority, routing it through agencies whose mandates did not cover internet platform regulation, and then used its political leverage to prevent effective legal challenge. The absence of prior judicial authorisation was not an oversight; it reflected the state's willingness to act outside legal frameworks when political imperatives demanded it. The third tenet is that states frame control as necessary for security, order, or national interest. Governments rarely present censorship or platform bans as what they are: acts of political control. Instead, they deploy narratives of national security, public safety, the fight against misinformation, or the protection of social order to justify restrictions. The Nigerian government described the Twitter ban as a response to the platform's use for activities that could undermine Nigeria's corporate existence. This language of existential threat is a classic example of how state control is legitimised through security framing, a mechanism well-documented in the State Control Theory literature. The fourth tenet is that state control of digital platforms serves not only immediate political purposes but also

a long-term disciplinary function. By demonstrating its capacity to shut down platforms, the state sends a message to citizens, civil society organisations, and technology companies about the limits of acceptable online behaviour and the costs of challenging state authority. This disciplinary effect, what scholars of free expression call the chilling effect, extends well beyond the period of any specific ban. It shapes user behaviour, encourages self-censorship, and reduces the practical effectiveness of digital civic space even in the absence of active censorship.

3.3 Application to the Nigerian Twitter Ban

Applied to the Twitter ban in Nigeria, State Control Theory reveals the ban not as an impulsive reaction to a single incident but as an expression of a deeper political logic in which the state seeks to manage digital civic space by controlling the platforms through which organised dissent operates. The ban followed a period in which Twitter had served as the primary tool for the most significant challenge to state authority in recent Nigerian history, the #EndSARS movement. From the perspective of State Control Theory, the government's hostility to Twitter was structurally predictable: the platform had demonstrated that it could facilitate rapid, large-scale, and internationally visible civic mobilisation that the state found difficult to manage through traditional means. The theory also helps to explain why the government chose Twitter specifically rather than other social media platforms, and why it opted for a platform ban rather than a broader internet shutdown. Twitter was the platform most closely associated with political opposition, civil society activism, and the international amplification of Nigerian citizens' grievances. A targeted ban allowed the government to suppress a specific civic tool while minimising the economic and reputational costs of a full internet shutdown. This selectivity is consistent with what State Control Theory identifies as strategic calibration, the tendency of states to adjust the scale and scope of control measures to achieve political objectives at the lowest possible cost.

3.4 Relevance to the Study

State Control Theory is particularly relevant to this study for three reasons. First, it provides a theoretically grounded explanation for why governments in democratising or hybrid-regime contexts impose digital restrictions, not because of genuine security threats but because digital platforms have become sites of political competition that the state seeks to manage. This framework helps this study go beyond descriptive accounts of the ban to offer an analytical explanation of its underlying political logic. Second, the theory situates the Nigerian Twitter ban within a broader comparative and historical pattern of state behaviour rather than treating it as an exceptional or idiosyncratic event. By doing so, it enables the study to draw on comparative literature from other African and Global South contexts where similar patterns of digital control have been documented, strengthening the analytical depth and relevance of the findings. Third, State Control Theory provides a normative basis for evaluating the ban's implications for democratic governance. If the state's exercise of control over digital platforms is understood as structurally driven by the logic of authority maintenance rather than by genuine regulatory purpose, then the appropriate policy response is not merely to improve the procedural framework for platform regulation but to build legal and institutional constraints that make it structurally difficult for the state to weaponise digital infrastructure against its own citizens. The recommendations offered at the end of this paper are grounded in this insight.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on internet shutdowns in Africa has expanded significantly since 2015, driven by the growing frequency of government-ordered digital disruptions and improved documentation capacity. Access Now's annual #KeepItOn reports have documented dozens of shutdowns across the continent each year, consistently showing that disruptions are strongly correlated with

elections, protests, and periods of political sensitivity (Access Now, 2022). Rød and Weidmann (2015) argue that internet shutdowns represent a new form of political repression that is cheaper, faster, and more deniable than traditional censorship, and that governments with weak accountability structures are more likely to deploy them. The Nigerian case extends this literature by illustrating that platform-specific bans pose a distinct set of governance challenges, differing from full internet shutdowns in both their legal character and their social consequences. On the relationship between social media and democratic participation in Nigeria, Nwangwu (2020) provides an important analysis of how Twitter functioned during the #EndSARS movement to organise nationwide protests and build international solidarity. His work shows that social media had become structurally embedded in Nigerian civic life by 2020, enabling forms of political communication and coordination that were independent of traditional media gatekeepers. This structural embeddedness is crucial for understanding why the government's decision to ban Twitter was experienced by many Nigerians not as a regulatory inconvenience but as a direct assault on the infrastructure of civic life. Feldstein's (2019) concept of digital authoritarianism offers a closely related theoretical lens. Feldstein documents how governments use digital technology to surveil, repress, and manipulate populations, and demonstrates that these practices are not confined to formally authoritarian states. They are adopted by hybrid regimes and nominally democratic governments when they face political challenges they cannot manage through conventional means. His framework complements State Control Theory and reinforces the interpretation of the Twitter ban as a politically motivated act rather than a regulatory measure. Legal scholars have noted that the right to freedom of expression in Section 39 of Nigeria's 1999 constitution has historically been narrowly interpreted and has been subject to significant executive limitations in practice (Obi, 2016). The absence of specific digital rights legislation in Nigeria means that online expression occupies a legally ambiguous space, protected in principle by the constitution but lacking the statutory provisions needed to make that protection practically enforceable in digital contexts. This gap, which the Twitter ban exposed dramatically, has been identified in the literature as One of the most critical weaknesses in Nigeria's democratic governance architecture.

Research on the economic consequences of internet shutdowns consistently demonstrates significant negative impacts on business activity, employment, and financial transactions (NetBlocks, 2021). The literature on democratic backsliding in West Africa, including work by Cheeseman and Cotard (2021), situates such events within a broader pattern in which elected governments use both legal and extralegal mechanisms to entrench Power, weaken accountability institutions, and limit the effectiveness of civil society. Taken together, this body of literature frames the Twitter ban not as an aberration but as an expression of structural tendencies in Nigerian governance that have implications for democratic consolidation across the region.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in document analysis and a systematic review of secondary sources. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the meaning, context, and political logic of the Twitter ban rather than to quantify its effects in statistical terms. Qualitative analysis enables a detailed, contextual examination of the ban's legal dimensions, its political background, and its consequences for digital rights and civic space in Nigeria. Data collection relied on two primary streams. The first involved the gathering and analysis of official documents, including government statements; directives issued by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC); court orders and legal opinions related to the ban; and relevant policy documents, such as the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy. The second stream drew on secondary sources,

including peer-reviewed academic articles, reports from civil society organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Paradigm Initiative, Access Now, and NetBlocks, and credible journalistic accounts. Sources were selected for their direct relevance to the study's core themes of digital rights, civic space, state control, and democratic governance in Nigeria and West Africa. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. Key themes were identified across the collected materials, grouped into analytical categories corresponding to the study's research questions, and interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework of digital rights and civic space and the theoretical framework of State Control Theory. Findings are presented as an integrated analytical narrative that connects primary document analysis with the existing scholarly literature, situating the Twitter ban within both the specifics of the Nigerian context and the broader comparative literature on digital governance in Africa.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 The Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of the Ban

One of the most striking findings of this study concerns the absence of any clear legal authority for the Twitter ban. From the outset, the government failed to cite a specific law empowering it to order telecommunications companies to block access to a social media platform. This is not a minor procedural deficiency. In a constitutional democracy, state restrictions on communication and expression must be grounded in law. The requirement of lawfulness is not merely a formality; it is a core safeguard against the arbitrary exercise of state Power. Nigeria's 1999 constitution, as amended, is explicit on this point. Section 39 guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. Courts and legal scholars have consistently interpreted this provision to cover forms of public communication, and there is a strong textual and doctrinal case that it encompasses online expression. The suspension of Twitter, a platform used by tens of millions of Nigerians to communicate, access news, engage in commerce, and participate in civic life, directly contravened this constitutional guarantee. The government offered no countervailing legal argument; it simply acted. The procedural irregularity of the ban compounded its constitutional problems. The initial directive was channelled through the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), whose statutory mandate under the NBC Act covers radio and television broadcasting, not internet services or social media platforms. When this jurisdictional mismatch became apparent, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), which holds regulatory authority over internet service providers, issued a follow-up directive ordering telecommunications companies to implement the ban (Paradigm Initiative, 2021). However, the NCC Act does not explicitly empower the commission to block specific online platforms. It provides for the regulation of communications networks and services but does not contain a provision authorising the shutdown of individual platforms based on an executive directive. The government, in short, imposed a major restriction on digital expression through agencies that lacked the specific statutory authority to do so. This finding is consistent with what State Control Theory predicts: when the state wishes to act for political reasons but lacks formal legal authority, it will act anyway and use institutional channels that offer the most plausible cover, even if legally insufficient. The routing of the Twitter ban through the NBC and then the NCC illustrates this dynamic precisely. Neither agency had clear authority, but both were used because the alternative, openly admitting that no legal basis existed, would have been even more politically costly. Civil society organisations and legal practitioners responded by challenging the ban in court. A Federal High court in Abuja issued an order directing the government to either charge Twitter with specific offences under Nigerian law or restore access to the platform. The government did neither. It neither complied with the court order nor appealed

it. It simply continued the ban. This executive non-compliance with a binding judicial order is among the most serious findings of this study. It indicates that, in the domain of digital governance, the Nigerian executive branch during this period operated with a degree of impunity that undermined the basic separation of powers on which constitutional democracy depends. This pattern has been noted in the literature on democratic backsliding, where scholars observe that hybrid regimes often maintain formal judicial institutions while routinely ignoring judicial decisions that constrain executive authority (Cheeseman & Cotard, 2021). The eventual lifting of the ban in December 2021 did not resolve the underlying legal problems. The ban was ended after Twitter agreed to establish a local office in Nigeria, pay applicable taxes, and appoint a designated representative to liaise with Nigerian authorities. Critics rightly observed that these conditions, while not unreasonable in themselves, were extracted through coercion rather than negotiation. Twitter complied not because the conditions were legally required but because it had no practical alternative while the ban remained in force. The government presented the outcome as a regulatory achievement. However, it is more accurately described as an exercise in state leverage: the government used an unlawful ban to extract compliance from a private company, then lifted the ban as though the matter had been resolved through normal regulatory processes. It had not. The absence of any legal accountability for those who ordered and maintained the ban means that any future administration could repeat the same action at any time.

6.2 Social and Political Effects of the Ban

The social effects of the Twitter ban were wide-ranging and fell disproportionately on groups that had come to rely on the platform in their professional, civic, and personal lives. Understanding these effects requires moving beyond the abstract language of rights violations to examine concretely what the ban meant for different categories of Nigerian citizens. For journalists and media workers, the ban disrupted established professional workflows in ways that were difficult to compensate for quickly. Twitter had become a primary channel for breaking news in Nigeria, enabling journalists to share developing stories, receive tip-offs from sources, and engage in the kind of rapid, networked information exchange that characterises modern digital journalism. When the ban took effect, journalists were forced to redirect their audiences to other platforms, many of which had smaller followings and less established networks of sources and readers. The loss of Twitter also affected the international visibility of Nigerian journalism. Stories that Nigerian reporters broke on Twitter often reached international audiences quickly because of the platform's global architecture. The ban reduced this visibility at a time when coverage of Nigerian affairs, particularly regarding #EndSARS accountability and the government's human rights record, was of international significance. For civil society organisations, the effects were similarly disruptive. Many of Nigeria's most prominent advocacy organisations had invested years in building Twitter presences that served as primary communication channels with their supporters, with journalists, and with international partners. The ban forced rapid improvisation: organisations shifted activity to Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp broadcast lists, and email newsletters, none of which replicated Twitter's combination of public visibility, rapid dissemination, and networked reach. The cost of this forced adaptation in staff time, audience reach, and organisational effectiveness was real and measurable, though difficult to quantify precisely. The economic effects of the ban were documented in considerable detail by NetBlocks, whose cost estimation tool calculated the daily economic loss attributable to the suspension. NetBlocks (2021) estimated losses running into the millions of dollars per day, reflecting Twitter's centrality to commercial activity in Nigeria's digital economy. Small business owners in the creative industries, musicians, visual artists, fashion designers, and content creators who had built their customer bases and revenue streams around

Twitter found themselves suddenly cut off from their primary marketing and sales channel. Freelancers who used Twitter to attract clients in the global market lost a tool that was difficult to replace with a comparable platform. These economic harms were borne primarily by individuals with limited capacity to absorb them, and no compensation mechanism was ever established. Politically, the ban provoked a near-universal backlash, both domestic and international, underscoring its illegitimacy. Within Nigeria, the condemnation was notable for its breadth: opposition politicians, the Nigerian Bar Association, the Newspaper Proprietors' Association, trade unions, student bodies, and civil society organisations were united in their criticism. This breadth of domestic opposition is significant because it demonstrates that the ban was not received as a controversial but defensible policy decision; it was widely understood as an unjustifiable attack on free expression. International condemnation from the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights reinforced this understanding. Perhaps the most revealing political consequence of the ban was the mass adoption of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) by Nigerian internet users. Within days of the suspension, Nigeria became One of the largest VPN markets in the world by download volume, with figures reportedly rising by several hundred percent. This widespread circumvention of the ban demonstrated two things clearly. First, it showed that the demand for Twitter access among Nigerians was sufficiently strong that millions of people were willing to acquire and learn to use technical workarounds rather than comply with the ban. Second, it demonstrated the practical limits of platform-specific censorship in an environment where VPN technology is accessible and affordable. The government was able to block direct access to Twitter, but it could not prevent its use. This gap between the intended and actual effects of the ban raises serious questions about its rationality as a policy measure. Further, it reinforces the conclusion that its primary purpose was political signalling rather than effective restriction of online activity.

6.3 Implications for Digital Rights and Democratic Governance

The findings presented above have several important implications for digital rights and democratic governance in Nigeria. Taken together, they suggest that the Twitter ban was not an isolated incident but a symptom of structural weaknesses in Nigeria's digital governance framework and a reflection of the state's willingness to use control over digital infrastructure for political ends. The most immediate implication concerns the absence of a legal framework to protect digital rights. The ban exposed a significant gap between Nigeria's formal constitutional commitments to freedom of expression and the practical legal tools available to citizens when those commitments are violated in digital contexts. Section 39 of the constitution protects free expression, but there is no specific legislation that translates this protection into enforceable rights regarding internet access, platform availability, or government-imposed digital restrictions. This legal gap allowed the ban to persist for seven months without a clear legal remedy, and it means that any future administration could impose similar or more severe restrictions with the same degree of impunity. The development of comprehensive digital rights legislation is therefore not a peripheral policy concern but a fundamental requirement for the effective protection of constitutional rights in the digital age. The second implication relates to the precedent set by the ban and its handling. By imposing a seven-month platform ban without legal authorisation, by ignoring a court order to either charge Twitter or restore access, and by framing a politically motivated act of censorship as a regulatory enforcement measure, the government demonstrated that digital censorship is politically viable in Nigeria. Future administrations, facing their own political pressures and civic challenges, now have a precedent to point to. The normalisation of platform bans as a tool of political management represents a structural threat to digital civic space that extends well beyond

the specific episode of the Twitter ban. Situating these findings within the framework of State Control Theory, the Twitter ban is best understood as a deliberate and calculated exercise of state authority over digital civic space, motivated by the government's desire to manage a platform it associated with organised civil society resistance. The theory predicts that states will seek to control communicative spaces when those spaces are used to challenge governing authority, and will deploy security narratives to legitimise that control. Both predictions were confirmed by the events of 2021. The government's actions also confirm the theory's fourth tenet: the ban served a disciplinary function, signalling to citizens, civil society, and technology companies that the state was willing and able to restrict digital access for political reasons. The chilling effect on expression created by this signal is real, even if it is difficult to measure directly. Finally, the findings have implications that extend beyond Nigeria to the broader West African region and the continent as a whole. The Twitter ban occurred against a background of democratic backsliding in which elected governments across West Africa have used both formal and informal mechanisms to consolidate executive Power and constrain accountability institutions (Cheeseman & Cotard, 2021). Nigeria's ban, as the act of Africa's most populous and influential state, carries significant regional symbolic weight. It signals to other governments that platform-specific censorship is a usable tool in the arsenal of political management, and that international condemnation, while significant, is not sufficient to deter or reverse such actions. Addressing this regional dimension will require coordinated advocacy and the development of binding regional standards on internet freedoms.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Twitter ban in Nigeria was not simply a regulatory dispute between a government and a technology company. It was a deliberate exercise of state control over digital civic space, motivated by political calculation rather than legitimate regulatory purpose, executed without lawful authority, and sustained in defiance of a court order. The ban violated constitutionally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and access to information, caused significant and well-documented economic harm, and drew wide condemnation domestically and internationally. Analysed through the framework of State Control Theory, it is precisely the kind of action that the theory predicts: a state seeking to manage political opposition by controlling the digital platforms through which that opposition organises and communicates. The response of Nigerian citizens demonstrated the depth of public attachment to digital rights. The mass adoption of VPNs, the breadth of domestic condemnation, and the sustained civil society advocacy for restoration of access all reflect a citizenry that understands online freedoms not as technical conveniences but as essential components of democratic life. The eventual lifting of the ban was a partial victory for this civic response. However, the structural conditions that made the ban possible, the absence of digital rights legislation, the weakness of judicial enforcement against the executive, and the lack of binding regional standards remain substantially unchanged. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered. The National Assembly should, as a matter of priority, enact comprehensive digital rights legislation that explicitly protects every Nigerian's right to internet access and online expression, and that establishes clear legal requirements, including prior judicial authorisation, for any government-ordered platform restriction or internet disruption. The Nigerian Communications Commission should develop a transparent, rule-of-law-based regulatory framework for managing complaints about online platform conduct, with mandatory civil society participation built into the regulatory process. Civil society organisations and digital rights groups should invest in widespread public Education on digital security tools, VPN usage, and legal remedies available when internet rights are violated, so that citizens are better equipped to protect their digital freedoms. The Nigerian government should formally acknowledge that the

2021 Twitter ban lacked any proper legal basis and commit publicly to never repeating such an action without prior judicial authorisation. African regional bodies, including the African Union and ECOWAS, should develop and enforce binding standards on platform bans and internet shutdowns, with accountability mechanisms that hold member states responsible when those standards are breached. The Twitter ban in 2021 must catalyze these reforms. Without them, the digital civic space that Nigerian citizens depend on for democratic participation will remain vulnerable to the same kind of state control documented in this study.

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