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**Silencing dissent**

In October, anti-police brutality activists in Nigeria used online platforms to raise awareness of and call for the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), an infamous police unit accused of extortion, extrajudicial killings, rape and torture. Their multi-faceted social media campaign, #EndSARS, resulted in widespread protests that captured the global imagination and elicited a violent response from the Nigerian government. As protests raged across the country, the security forces forcefully detained dozens of protesters and used water cannons and teargas to disperse the crowds. The government’s crack down on the protest movement reached its peak on October 20, when security forces opened fire on a peaceful protest camp in the country’s commercial capital, Lagos, killing 12 unarmed protesters.

Despite the government’s brutal response, and the regrettable acts of violence by a limited number of demonstrators as well as other unrelated groups taking advantage of the unrest, the #EndSARS campaign demonstrated the extensive role social media can play in advancing modern governance and human rights in Africa.

Through social media platforms, the #EndSARS activists not only managed to call thousands of Nigerians to action and hold Nigerian authorities to account, but also garnered unprecedented international attention and support for their cause.

The fact that a burgeoning human rights movement has been contemplated, created and sustained online did not go unnoticed in the overwhelmingly conservative halls of power in Nigeria. Shaken to the core by this new media phenomenon and its astounding proclivity to galvanise a traditionally silenced and disregarded youthful majority, some Nigerian state governors and public officials started to demand that social media be regulated.

On November 2, for example, the Northern Governors’ Forum issued a communique calling for the strict supervision and censorship of social media to thwart ‘subversive actions’ and ‘avoid the spread of fake news’.

Far from being the exception to the norm, such troubling attempts to govern social media usage and effectively impede progressive public discourse and the universal right to assemble peacefully have become increasingly ubiquitous and fairly normalised throughout Africa.

On August 16, for example, a communique published by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), read much like the statement from the Nigerian governors. It “urged Member States to take pro-active measures to mitigate external interference, the impact of fake news and the abuse of social media, especially in electoral processes”.

That a whole regional bloc attributed the emergence of social media-driven dissent to “external” designs is most disturbing. The regional bloc’s ambition to control the content posted on social media platforms is undoubtedly sinister, especially in a region fraught with hotly disputed elections and violent spurts of authoritarian crackdowns on mundane civic activism and political opposition. Needless to say, the aim of the SADC’s statement is not to protect Africans from foreign disinformation campaigns and fake news, but to ensure self-serving narratives and political agendas promoted by local governments remain unchallenged.

Angola, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Swaziland and Zambia already introduced harsh laws that regulate “social media abuse”. Zimbabwe and Lesotho are also in the process of introducing new social media controls.

While the regulations promulgated in these countries appear essential and even reasonably progressive on the surface, they contain problematic clauses aligned to dubious “national security” imperatives. And in practice, they all serve to instil doubt and fear in social media users and encourage them to practice self-censorship to avoid facing the wrath of the state machinery for voicing their grievances about their governments and local institutions.

The “good old days” of archetypal state media organisations, or media empires with strong ties to dominant political forces, singlehandedly churning out jingoistic propaganda to diversity-starved and disinterested listeners, viewers and readers are truly over.

Still, in the main, Africa’s rulers remain unwilling to move on and embrace the changing times. Social media platforms have allowed the masses to scrutinise the actions of their leaders and demand accountability in real-time, but many African leaders are failing to understand that they no longer have the ability to diminish or obliterate the truth by establishing and moderating national conversation topics through “friendly” media organisations.

During the #EndSARS protests, for example, Nigeria’s president, Muhammadu Buhari, complained that his government’s critics were spreading “deliberate falsehoods and misinformation” through social media, claiming “that this government is oblivious of the pains and plights of its citizens”.

With these words, he attempted to delegitimise not only the protests, but also Nigerians’ right to form an independent opinion on the policies and actions of their elected government. More importantly, he made it clear that he believes Nigerian people should only consume information and opinions compiled, approved and disseminated by the Nigerian state, or media houses that support his administration’s policies.

It did not dawn on the Nigerian president that the #EndSARS protests themselves were in fact a solid repudiation of the “truths” and state-sanctioned opinions his administration has long been pushing on the Nigerian people.

Excerpted: ‘How social media regulations are silencing dissent in Africa’

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