

July 19, 2021

Nigeria's Conflict with Biafra and Social Media

On June 2, Twitter (TWTR, \$61.72) removed a tweet posted by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari that vaguely threatened Biafran separatists. Buhari's tweet appeared to be in response to a series of attacks against Nigerian security forces and police officers. In any case, Buhari has become the latest high-level political leader to have his tweet removed by Twitter. The move comes just months after former U.S. President Donald Trump was permanently banned from the platform. In this article, we explore Nigeria's current problems in Biafra and the government's response. We also show how the situation reflects the growing friction between social media companies and governments all over the world. We end with a discussion of the ramifications for investors.

Evolution of the Biafra Issue

Since Nigeria gained its independence from the British in 1960, the ethnic Igbo people in the southeastern region of the country have posed a challenge to the government. Historically, the Nigerian government has been dominated by northern tribes. In 1966, a group of military officers, mostly of the Igbo tribe, overthrew the first Nigerian government and assassinated many of its leaders. In response, northern tribes led a counter coup, retook the government, and massacred many Igbo tribesmen. The massacres were so brutal that Igbos, as well as other smaller tribes located in the east, decided to declare their independence from

Nigeria in 1967. The new country was called Biafra. Soon afterwards, the Nigerian government declared war on the breakaway region, thus igniting the Nigerian Civil War.



After three years of fighting, the Nigerian government was able to force Biafra to surrender. Following the secessionists' defeat by the Nigerian military, the federal government pursued a policy of reconciliation called "no winners, no losers." The campaign was designed to promote mediation between the warring sides by implying that Nigeria is better together than apart. Although the campaign meant well, it couldn't resolve the underlying tensions. Since the conflict, Igbos have felt alienated and maligned as the group has been prevented from participating in government. Despite making up about a quarter of the population, Igbos have been excluded from holding the highest political and military positions in the federal government, including the [presidency](#).

The election of Muhammadu Buhari to the presidency helped reignite the pro-Biafra independence movement. Since taking office, he has been a staunch critic of the pro-Biafra movement and has been relentless in his crackdown on demonstrations. In 2016, the Nigerian military was accused of killing 150 pro-Biafran protesters. The president has never been shy about his dislike for the secessionists. During the Nigerian Civil War, Buhari was part of the forces that fought against the secessionists. As a result, Igbos have frequently accused Buhari of being [prejudiced against them](#). To their point, his focus on pro-Biafra protesters does seem to be disproportionate. Although he has frequently criticized Boko Haram for misrepresenting Islam, he has been much more restrained in his criticism of that group despite numerous high-profile [atrocities](#). For example, in February, police confirmed that members of Boko Haram [kidnapped 317 school girls](#) in Jangebe.

Over the last few months, Nigerians have become dissatisfied with their government's response to the increase in kidnappings, bombings, and police shootings. This discontent helped launch several Twitter protest campaigns and has rejuvenated the pro-Biafra movement. The increased push for Biafran independence has been led by a group called the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Founded in 2012, its leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, has promoted the movement on his London-based Radio Biafra podcast and through several Twitter accounts. The largest account has over 336,000 followers. Kanu has used these Twitter accounts to spread conspiracy theories and raise awareness for his cause. One narrative that he frequently shares suggests that the real Buhari died and the current president is his clone. The rumor has become so widespread that the president was forced to comment on it publicly, which drew more attention to it.

The stunt was so outlandish that comedy shows such as [Saturday Night Live](#) made jokes about it. In June 2021, Kanu was arrested on charges of treason. He was originally charged in 2015 but avoided arrest by [fleeing the country](#).

Recently, IPOB has been a growing concern for the Nigerian government. So far, the government has struggled to find the best strategy to slow the group's growing influence. In 2017, the government labelled the group [a terrorist organization](#) following a series of attacks on police stations and government offices by people sympathetic to the movement. Although IPOB claims to be peaceful, it does seem to have at least an affiliation with the Eastern Security Network (ESN), a paramilitary group. Last year, ESN formed an alliance with Cameroonian separatists. To date, there hasn't been much evidence to suggest that the two sides have fought together against Nigerian or Cameroonian forces; however, the groups have shared military intelligence and have held joint military exercises.

As of late, the government has favored military intervention as a way to quell secessionist protests. In 2016, Amnesty International accused the Nigerian military of killing [at least 150 pro-Biafra protesters](#). This heavy-handed approach has not had the desired effect. So far, the military has not been able to deter IPOB from protesting nor prevent the ESN from launching attacks on government sites. Additionally, reports and videos of the government's brutality have circulated through social media and have been used to garner support for the Biafra movement. Hence, the response of the Nigerian military may have aided efforts to recruit more people to the cause.

Social Media and the Biafra Issue

The Biafra conflict illustrates how social media firms can now get embroiled in social

and political conflicts all around the world. Governments and their opponents alike seek to harness social media to promote their causes, making it difficult for social media firms to remain neutral. For example, in order to justify its removal of Buhari's tweet and the subsequent 12-hour suspension of Buhari's account, Twitter claimed that the tweet had violated its "[abusive behavior](#)" policy, which prohibits "content that wishes, hopes, promotes, incites, or expresses a desire for death or bodily harm" against an individual or group. Specifically, Buhari's tweet referenced a return to the aforementioned [Nigerian Civil War](#), in which over 2 million people died by way of conflict and starvation.

In retaliation against Twitter, the Nigerian government indefinitely blocked the social media site from its mobile network. It also ordered federal prosecutors [to arrest users who access the site](#) through VPN or other methods. Nigeria's response reflects the threat social media can pose to a government's sovereignty. In its justification for removing Twitter from its network, the Buhari regime stated that Twitter was facilitating "[activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence.](#)" The government's move to block Twitter was met with condemnation from the U.S. and the EU.

However, Nigeria's relationship with Twitter was tense prior to Buhari's tweet removal. In April, [Twitter chose Ghana](#) over Nigeria for its African headquarters. In a statement, Twitter stated that Ghana is a supporter of "free speech, online freedom, and the Open Internet." Although the move was not surprising given Nigeria's history of cracking down on open dissent, the move was viewed as a slight by many within the Nigerian government. Nigeria has over [39.6 million Twitter users](#), and the platform has proven to be very popular among the

Nigerian youth. In addition, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey's endorsement of the EndSARS movement, Nigeria's version of the "Defund the Police" movement, has drawn the ire of many government officials who view the support as a form of meddling.

Since the start of the ban, Twitter and the Nigerian government have been engaged in talks. The Nigerian government appears to be using the ban as a way to extract concessions from Twitter. The country's Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, stated that Twitter needs [to register as a company in Nigeria](#) before the ban can be lifted. It isn't clear whether or not Twitter will give into those demands, but it does appear that the government is looking for a way to increase [its control over social media platforms](#). Government officials have already sought policies to regulate Twitter and similar companies.

Even though the Twitter ban will likely not be removed anytime soon, it is widely viewed as temporary. For one, Twitter is widely used among business owners within Nigeria. Firms have used the platform to promote their services, post jobs, and attract investment. An estimate by Netblock, a privately held business that monitors internet governance, shows that the ban costs Nigeria [\\$6 million a day](#). Additionally, the government has been unable to stop activists from using the site. Following the announcement of the ban on Twitter, many pointed out the irony of the government using the website that it had just banned. When the ban is removed, we expect that Twitter and other social media companies will be under intense scrutiny by regulators. Hence, this will likely not be the last time Nigeria bans a website from its network.

Ramifications

In conclusion, the dispute between the Nigerian government and the IPOB is

unlikely to lead to a new civil war. At this point, it doesn't appear that the secessionists are confident they can win a direct conflict against the Nigerian military. Their strategy appears to be more focused on agitation than actual combat. In this case, their likely goal is to either bait the Nigerian government into an overreaction in order to draw international condemnation or raise the costs of occupation to a level that is unmanageable. The passivity of their approach becomes more obvious when compared to Boko Haram, which has launched much larger and more damaging attacks. In fact, based on what can be found on the social media account of the group's leader, [Mazi Nnamdi Kanu](#), the group's focus appears to be more on delegitimizing the Nigerian government than on forcing it out of Biafra. The group's goal is to either have its own country or, at a minimum, be granted some sort of autonomy.

That being said, Nigeria's ban of Twitter appears to be part of a growing trend as other countries have also pursued similar restrictions. India is a recent example. In April, Indian authorities visited Twitter's offices in New Delhi to dispute a post being labeled as fake news. If other countries continue down this path, it will hinder the efforts of Twitter and other social media companies' ability to enter into foreign markets. Additionally, it will likely pave the way for more scrutiny of tech firms globally. In other words, governments' pushback against social media firms will constitute another type of rising regulatory risk for

major technology firms. Furthermore, if social media companies begin to cave to the demands of authoritarian governments, they could face criticism from the U.S. and Europe. Google received a lot of flack for limiting searches in China in order to gain access to the country's market. The conundrum social media firms face is deciding whether they will uphold Western standards by promoting free speech or allow themselves to be barred by foreign nations. Either way, these companies will likely be under intense scrutiny going forward as both democratic and authoritarian governments vie to influence their policies.

Without a medium for individuals to vent or a forum to express one's grievances, countries may become vulnerable to more violent forms of unrest. Moreover, people often use social media as a way to connect with loved ones. Thus, removing these sites could be detrimental to societal morale. As a result, the crackdown on tech will likely heighten the distrust people feel toward their governments, which may lead to increased uncertainty in emerging markets. Unrest in these countries, which are often major commodity producers, raises the possibility of supply disruptions and encourages investors to seek safe haven in risk-free assets. This scenario is likely favorable for commodities and Treasuries.

Thomas Wash
July 19, 2021

This report was prepared by Thomas Wash of Confluence Investment Management LLC and reflects the current opinion of the author. It is based upon sources and data believed to be accurate and reliable. Opinions and forward-looking statements expressed are subject to change without notice. This information does not constitute a solicitation or an offer to buy or sell any security.

Confluence Investment Management LLC

Confluence Investment Management LLC is an independent Registered Investment Advisor located in St. Louis, Missouri. The firm provides professional portfolio management and advisory services to institutional and individual clients. Confluence's investment philosophy is based upon independent, fundamental research that integrates the firm's evaluation of market cycles, macroeconomics and geopolitical analysis with a value-driven, company-specific approach. The firm's portfolio management philosophy begins by assessing risk and follows through by positioning client portfolios to achieve stated income and growth objectives. The Confluence team is comprised of experienced investment professionals who are dedicated to an exceptional level of client service and communication.