Regulatory Pause or Regulatory Reset? What Nigeria's Digital Policy Harmonisation Means for Platforms, Regulators and Investors

www.strenandblan.com
contact@strenandblan.com
@strenandblan

+234 (0)702 558 0053
3 Theophilus Orji Street, Off Fola Osibo Road, Lekki Phase 1, Lagos, Nigeria

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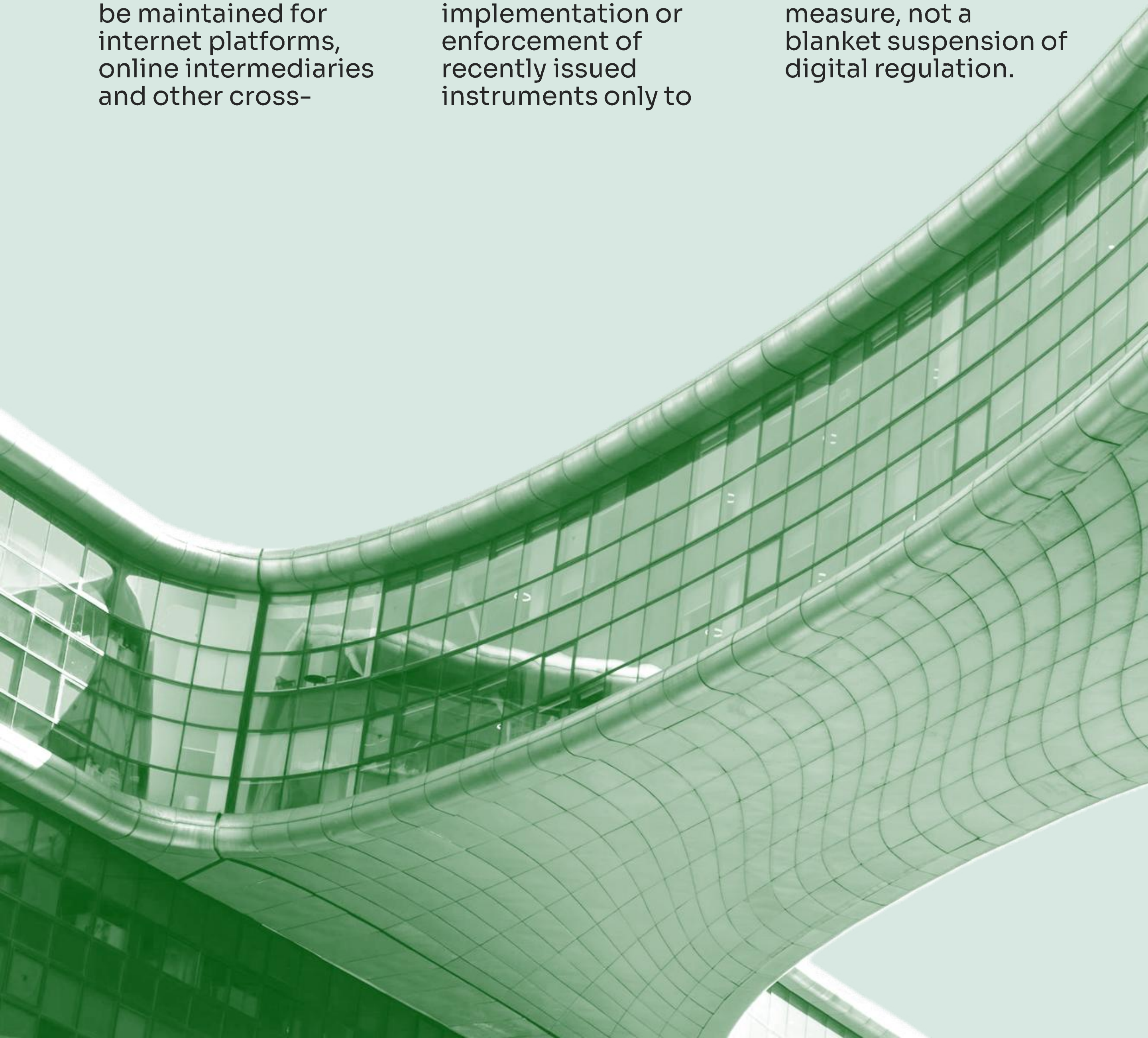
Introduction

On 7 July 2026, the Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy directed that the existing regulatory status quo be maintained for internet platforms, online intermediaries and other cross-cutting digital-economy matters undergoing inter-agency policy harmonisation. It also directed relevant agencies to defer the implementation or enforcement of recently issued instruments only to the extent that they concern matters within the scope of that harmonisation exercise. The directive is therefore a targeted coordination measure, not a blanket suspension of digital regulation.



The Growing Challenge of Regulatory Convergence

Nigeria's digital economy has expanded rapidly, driven by fintech, e-commerce, cloud computing, digital financial services, artificial intelligence, online marketplaces and digital media. This growth has also complicated the regulatory landscape because digital businesses rarely fit within a single regulatory category. A platform may simultaneously process personal data, facilitate advertising, deploy algorithmic systems, provide payment-related functionality and host commercial transactions. An AI-enabled service may likewise engage telecommunications, cybersecurity, consumer protection, competition law, intellectual property and data privacy.

Consequently, the statutory mandates of sector regulators increasingly intersect. The Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) regulates communications services and infrastructure; the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) is responsible for information-technology development and related standards; and the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC) oversees compliance with Nigeria's data protection framework. Depending on the business model, the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC), the Central Bank of Nigeria and other sector regulators may also have jurisdiction.

Although each institution derives its powers from its enabling legislation, technological convergence can produce overlapping rules, parallel reporting obligations and uncertainty over the lead regulator for a particular activity. For businesses operating across multiple digital sectors, this increases compliance cost, execution risk and the possibility of inconsistent regulatory expectations. The Ministry’s intervention recognises that cross-cutting digital issues require coordinated policy development and implementation, while preserving the statutory mandates conferred on each regulator by law.

Understanding the Ministerial Directive

The directive has four principal elements.

First, the existing regulatory status quo is to be maintained for matters concerning internet platforms, online intermediaries and other cross-cutting digital-economy issues that are undergoing harmonisation.

Second, relevant agencies are to defer the implementation or enforcement of recently issued regulations, codes, guidelines, frameworks, directives or administrative requirements, but only to the extent that the relevant provisions concern areas within the harmonisation process.

Third, provisions falling squarely within an agency's express statutory mandate remain operational and enforceable, provided they are consistent with the Minister's policy direction.

Fourth, a Joint Technical Coordination Committee comprising representatives of the NCC, NITDA and NDPC is to conduct technical engagements, consult stakeholders and develop recommendations for a harmonised national policy and governance framework.

Implications for Digital Platforms and Technology Companies

For digital platforms and technology companies, the immediate effect of the directive is greater regulatory certainty. Many businesses had expressed concerns regarding overlapping compliance obligations arising from multiple regulatory instruments addressing similar operational issues. Where businesses operate simultaneously across telecommunications, digital advertising, cloud infrastructure, AI development, online marketplaces and data processing, inconsistent regulatory expectations can significantly increase compliance costs. By maintaining the regulatory status quo pending harmonisation, the Ministry provides businesses with temporary certainty while the consultation process unfolds.

The directive should not, however, be treated as a compliance holiday. The Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, the Nigerian Communications Act 2003, applicable cybersecurity, consumer-protection and competition laws, and valid sector-specific obligations remain enforceable within the responsible agency's statutory mandate. Companies should continue to comply with existing law, identify which pending or recently issued instruments may be affected, document the legal basis for any reliance on the directive and engage constructively in the consultation process.

Implications for Regulators

For regulators, the harmonisation exercise creates an opportunity to clarify institutional boundaries, establish lead-agency and referral mechanisms, coordinate rulemaking and enforcement, and reduce duplicative reporting. Its effectiveness will depend on whether the resulting framework is anchored in the agencies' enabling statutes, supported by transparent procedures and capable of resolving conflicts without informally displacing powers conferred by the National Assembly.

Implications for Investors

For investors, the potential benefit lies in improved regulatory predictability rather than deregulation.

Regulatory certainty remains one of the most important considerations influencing investment decisions within emerging digital markets. Investors generally favour jurisdictions where legal obligations are predictable, institutional responsibilities are clearly defined and compliance expectations remain consistent over time. Conversely, fragmented regulation increases legal risk, raises compliance costs and may discourage long-term investment. By pursuing a coordinated regulatory framework, the Government signals its intention to create a more stable policy environment capable of supporting continued digital innovation. A harmonised framework could improve Nigeria's attractiveness as a destination for technology investment by reducing regulatory ambiguity while preserving appropriate regulatory oversight.

Practical Priorities for Businesses During the Harmonisation Period

Businesses should use the harmonisation period to:

i. map all existing and recently issued regulatory instruments applicable to their activities;

ii. Distinguish obligations that remain clearly enforceable under extant law from provisions potentially affected by the directive;

iii. monitor communications from the Ministry and relevant regulators; and

iv. participate in stakeholder consultations, directly or through industry associations. Where the scope of the directive is uncertain, businesses should seek written regulatory clarification rather than assume that an obligation has been deferred

Conclusion

The Ministry's directive represents more than a temporary administrative pause. It reflects a recognition that Nigeria's digital economy has matured beyond a regulatory model built around isolated institutional mandates. As technologies continue to converge, regulatory coordination becomes essential to preserving legal certainty, encouraging innovation and maintaining investor confidence. The real significance of the directive therefore lies not in the temporary suspension of certain regulatory measures but in its ambition to establish a more coherent, predictable and collaborative governance framework for Nigeria's digital economy. The success of the harmonisation initiative will ultimately depend on the quality of stakeholder engagement and the clarity of the resulting governance framework.

Whether the process becomes a genuine regulatory reset will depend on the substance of the harmonised framework, the transparency of the consultation process and the clarity of any transitional arrangements. If the exercise clearly delineates responsibilities, reduces duplication and preserves lawful regulatory oversight, it could become an important milestone in the evolution of Nigeria’s digital regulatory architecture.

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The **Authors**

Francisca Igboanugo

Team Lead

AbdulAfeez Abdulrazaq

Associate

Emmanuella Otu

Associate

STREN & BLAN
PARTNERS

+234 (0)702 558 0053
3 Theophilus Orji Street, Off Fola Osibo Road,
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