



## **Twitter threatened with shutdown in Pakistan**

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**ISLAMABAD:** Micro-blogging website Twitter, a platform that has in recent years become integral to political parties, stands in danger of being banned because of the government's inability to force the tech giant to bend to its notions of what is suitable for public consumption or falls within the constitutional realm of legitimate free speech.

On Wednesday, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) informed the Senate Standing Committee on Cabinet Secretariat that while Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms complied with requests from the government to block objectionable content, Twitter did not oblige.

"Out of a hundred requests from Pakistan to block certain offensive material, roughly five per cent are entertained. Twitter ignores all the remaining requests," Director General of PTA's Internet Policy and Web Analysis, Nisar Ahmed, told the committee.

The committee met for a briefing on penalties fixed by the PTA against 'derogatory' comments spreading through social media targeting the state, its citizens and its institutions.

Mr Ahmed informed the committee about last week's Islamabad High Court (IHC) directive to the regulatory body to serve Twitter with a final notice, asking the website to respond to requests from Pakistan or face the risk of being blocked in the country.

"The PTA has conveyed the court's concern to Twitter, but has not got a response. The regulatory authority will implement court orders if Twitter does not respond to the final notice," said Mr Ahmed. He further explained to the committee members that the IHC had taken notice of the increase in objectionable content posted on social media websites.

The official told the committee that Twitter was not as popular in Pakistan as Facebook, and so they had little to lose if Twitter was blocked. However, the platform would lose business if it was shut down in the country, the senior official told the members. "The court is determined to teach Twitter a lesson — they will lose business," he added.

He informed the committee that Facebook had been extremely cooperative with Pakistan, and had obliged when asked to block content that might be perceived offensive.

"In fact, Facebook has appointed a focal person to address the concerns from Pakistan. The focal person is a Pakistani national who understands the traditions, customs and concerns of our society. YouTube is now also offering a local version in the country and removing offensive material, and the website is no longer an issue," the official elaborated.

According to the PTA, social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube and DailyMotion now saw Pakistan as an emerging information technology market, which they could tap into to exponentially grow their businesses.

"These companies do not only wish to keep growing in Pakistan, but have also planned to bring underdeveloped cities and towns out of — through training programmes — their current states to put them on a par with developed areas," Mr Ahmed concluded.

When Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf information sectary Fawad Chaudhry was contacted for his views on the matter, he said that his party was against any kind of censorship on free media.

“Those who do not wish to see objectionable and offensive content should not search for such content. Social media is not just for recreation and entertainment. There are jobs and households associated with the business. Blocking social media websites will have both social and economic impacts,” said Mr Chaudhry, who is tipped to become information minister in the new government.

In the past, similar attempts have been made to block the spread of social media: Facebook was banned in the country twice in 2008 and then again in 2010. In September 2012, following government directions, the PTA blocked access to YouTube throughout the country and it remained inaccessible for over two years.

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