

Threat to ban Twitter in Pakistan worries digital experts

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KARACHI: With mounting censorship and increasing threats to dissent in the country, [reports of a shutdown](#) against micro-blogging website Twitter have worried digital rights experts, journalists and activists as well as common users.

On Wednesday, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) said it had warned Twitter that the tech giant would be banned in Pakistan for not complying with its directive to block 'objectionable content' despite repeated requests from the authorities. In its final notice to the micro-blogging website, the authority said a blanket ban would be instated in the country if the government's requests were not addressed within 15 days.

Following reports of the possible shutdown, German Ambassador to Pakistan Martin Kobler expressed his concerns.

In a tweet, he said: "Worried about press reports that #twitter is threatened in #pakistan. I love my followers. I learn so much from you. Social media must be handled with responsibility but must not be blocked. A free country needs free social media!"

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"These bans and shutdowns only serve to de-stabilise the image of the country. Other countries are moving forward taking advantage of the digital age but Pakistan is still afraid of the internet," digital rights expert Nighat Dad said while speaking to Dawn.

Recalling how similar attempts had been made to block the spread of social media in the country in the past when Facebook was banned twice in 2008 and then again in 2010 and access to YouTube was blocked in 2012 for over two years, Ms Dad said the ban would not work this time as times had changed.

"People have become more digitally aware now. Their lives literally depend on the internet and even political leaders rely on social media for communication. Twitter is far more popular [and useful] than they [authorities] perceive it to be," she added.

Besides disrupting public discourse, banning a website constitutes as violation of Article 19 of the Constitution, Ms Dad pointed out. "We will challenge the decision legally, if it is instated, for it is restricting free speech and access to information which is a right under the Constitution," she asserted.

Interestingly, Pakistan is not alone in expressing concern over Twitter's inability to curb propaganda. The company has been widely criticised for years for their seemingly lax efforts to police bad actors, including abusive users.

Recently, amid increasing pressure from various countries in the election year, the company suspended 70 million accounts as part of a crackdown on malicious activity on its platform.

In a blog post earlier this year, the company wrote it had identified and challenged more than 9.9 million potentially spammy or automated accounts per week and had introduced measures to fight abuse, hateful conduct and violent extremism.

However, telecom authorities in Pakistan maintain that whenever they sought information about an individual who had uploaded 'objectionable content', Twitter did not respond and rarely took down the content.

What is objectionable content?

Speaking to Dawn, PTA chairman Muhammad Naveed pointed out that it was not under the regulatory body's mandate to shut down a website. "We are answerable to institutions and Twitter is not cooperating. We have asked them to remove blasphemous content related to Shaukat Aziz case and they have not responded. There are many other similar cases," he insisted.

Although what constitutes as 'objectionable' is open to interpretation, online content is monitored under the Prevention of Electronics Crime Act (Peca) which defines 'unlawful online content'.

Clause 37 of Peca empowers PTA to regulate internet content as under: "Unlawful online content.-(I) The Authority shall have the power to remove or block or issue directions for removal or blocking of access to an information through any information system if it considers it necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court or commission of or incitement to an offence under this Act."

The PTA chairman further clarified recent reports suggesting that the authorities are planning to crackdown on the use of social media under a 'Social Media Control Act' under which online abuse would lead to punishment of three years and a fine worth Rs10 million. "There is no particular act related to social media. We only implement punishment liable under Peca," he said.

Director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights, Usama Khilji is of the opinion that the state must not play judge on what people are allowed to say as long as it does not directly incite violence or cause harm.

"We have seen the state abuse Section 10 of the Peca 16 (cybercrime bill) which relates to terrorism being used against activists that criticise state policies. Citizens must be allowed to criticise the policies of a state that they

fund through their taxes and government that they choose through their votes," he maintained.

However, optimistic that with Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's reliance on social media for its success to be elected to power, the digital rights expert said he expected little to no support for the move to ban Twitter from the new government.

Speaking about alternative measures to curtail spread of inflammatory content online, Ms Dad cited Germany's example where websites are charged with a hefty penalty if they don't comply with official requests. "Hold the websites accountable instead of punishing internet users," she advised.

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