

Pakistan planning internet crackdown

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN: Confidential Pakistani document reveals plans for stricter control of the internet and freedom of expression.

Since May 20, Pakistan has experienced a wave of strict internet content control with thousands of web pages blocked following a Facebook campaign inviting users to "Draw Muhammad". The Facebook campaign pushed Pakistani authorities to actively engage in blocking and filtering internet content, leaving Pakistani citizens powerless against the online blanket ban. Further plans by the government to continue to filter any content it considers "objectionable" have been revealed in a confidential document obtained by APC member Bytes for All.

"These new guidelines will give Pakistan's government the power to cripple Pakistani citizens' access to information and freedom of expression over the internet," say internet rights activists.

New policy guidelines give Pakistani authorities "carte blanche" over internet content.

A range of content is susceptible to control

The confidential document was submitted by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) to the Lahore High Court on 15 June 2010 at the court's recent hearing on the Facebook case.

It is a draft of policy guidelines on how internet content should be monitored and controlled in Pakistan. The guidelines show how Pakistani authorities are allowing general content filtering of the internet and a number of limitations are outlined in the documents that would normally be deemed as unacceptable in Pakistan.

The document uses language that is vague and ambiguous, and open to wide interpretation. These guidelines pertain not only to religious material, but also include political and other content.

The document also makes reference to an existing inter-ministerial committee which is currently monitoring internet content. However, the terms of reference and scope of work of this committee were never made public, and is suspected to be operating covertly.

Impeding on freedom of expression

"If implemented, PTA's proposed policy guidelines can give the authorities the power to filter the internet freely and impede on people's freedom of expression, access to information, and block online activism," say activists.

Internet rights activists in Pakistan are urging the government to play its key role on provision of free and open internet for its citizens. "The PTA should be directed to stop excessive monitoring, filtering and surveillance of internet, which is causing slow browsing and inaccessibility of various important websites and domains," say activists. "The PTA and its allied agencies should not infringe upon peoples' right to information and free expression on various socio-political issues in the country."

Internet rights activists also fear that such dubious policy guidelines will give the agencies a free hand to selectively curb people's voices and bring grave negative implications for the larger civil rights movement.

"After all, it is the Judiciary in the country, which has to safeguard constitutional provisions of fundamental rights of people of Pakistan," say the activists.

For more:

- [Facebook ban is shocking, says Bytes for All, APCNews, 25 May 2010.](#)

[Pakistani internet ban is excuse to "curb voices against corruption", APCNews, 8 June 2010.](#)

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