

August 10, 2016

Dear Members of YPF,

Thank you for nominating and selecting me as one of the 10 youth champions of Pakistan.

I stand before you today apparently in recognition of efforts made to secure the rights of Internet users. I regret though that this is no moment for personal recognition or glory, not when the future of the youth of Pakistan stands threatened. What is that threat? The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill, which is on today's orders of the day of the National Assembly, set to receive the approval of parliament and become law.

For over a year, not just I, but many citizens and professionals fought long and hard to fix this bill. We engaged with the government and opposition. Provided input to make the law better. We never said there shouldn't be a law but that the law needed to respect fundamental rights and due process. While we found many allies among you - parliamentarians without whose efforts it would have been an even more difficult struggle - there were many part of the same system who labelled us as agents and propagandists. On one occasion, the doors of parliament house were shut upon us. Stack loads of written input was disregarded and we were told we were just noise-makers who'd given nothing at all.

How I wish the certificate awarded today was actually a significantly amended version of the bill. A bill that did not trample on the rights of citizens. A bill that factored in the input we'd provided. I have come here today not for the certificate, but to ask you, if you will commit to the youth of this country beyond certificates?

The youth of this country is losing hope. I come to ask you if you will do all that is in your power to do, to restore it. If you want to give the youth of this country hope, then do not dismiss them. Do not stick labels. Do not isolate them. They don't need certificates to give them hope. They need to see that things will be done differently - that their input will be considered and that you will constructively engage with them. That you will enter questions, and motions and resolutions on vital issues that concern citizens. That you will wage a struggle within your parties to make them see differently on issues. And that you will use your vote when it counts, and block legislation that seeks to take away our constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and rights.

If the bill is passed today, in its current form, the message that will go out to the youth of Pakistan is that there is no room or tolerance for thinking minds and dissenting voices. Should the youth inquire and raise questions, a harsh fine and long jail term awaits them.

Is this the future you want to give the youth of Pakistan? If not, then when you go to the National Assembly today at 3pm, stop the bill from becoming law. Allow time to fix it. Show the youth of this country that not only will you recognize efforts outside parliament; but that you will also honour these efforts by casting your vote to protect their rights inside parliament too. If you do this, that would be true recognition.

Thank you.

Fariha Aziz  
Concerned citizen, digital rights activist and journalist