

Civil society statement on continued network shutdowns and platform blocking in Pakistan

13 March, 2024: We, a collective of human rights activists and civil society organisations, express profound concern over the increasing instances of internet shutdowns and social media platform blocking, specifically in the lead up to and following the general elections in Pakistan. These actions not only infringe upon the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and access to information but also set a troubling precedent of throttling genuine political discourse including plurality of voices in the country.

The arbitrary blocking of platforms, including the prolonged and unannounced disruption of "X" (formerly known as Twitter), is a sobering illustration of growing digital censorship in the country. Such actions not only silence diverse political voices, but also create an environment which contributes to the spread of misinformation. Today, digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse, and ensuring the free flow of information, through these digital mediums, is imperative for an informed society and fair electoral processes. The suppression of digital platforms, especially when initiated without transparency, often lacks adherence to due legal process and thus, undermines Pakistan's international law commitments.

The complete silence of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) is extremely alarming as they have failed to furnish any reasons for its actions and exceeded its mandate to block an entire internet platform. The absence of transparency in the decision-making processes surrounding network shutdowns and platform blocking and complete disregard for any accountability has resulted in an obvious erosion of trust between the state and its citizens. We are also dismayed by reports of throttling of VPNs, undermining people's access to information and right to privacy.

In light of these concerns, we call for immediate action to reverse the course of digital censorship in Pakistan. Specifically, we urge the government and public bodies to;

- Immediately unblock Twitter / X in Pakistan
- Repeal sections of the law such as Section 37 of PECA that enable censorship and violate Article 19 right to freedom of speech and press freedom and Article 19-A right of access to information
- Act with transparency on decisions that impact the free use of the internet, including for political and economic purposes.
- Issue statement of clarification, outlining the reasons and legal basis for the recent blocking of "X" and other affected platforms.
- Avoid future actions that obstruct the free flow of information and adversely affect political discourse within the countries and take back all legislative proposals expanding control and censorship over the internet including the e-safety bill from the previous government's tenure should not be revived.

- Abide by Pakistan's commitments to uphold freedom of expression and right to access to information under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

We urge the incoming government, regulators and other public bodies to recognise that any action that affects the flow of information and limits citizen's ability to express themselves, has a direct and lingering impact on citizen's human rights including the right to political participation.

Signatories

Organisations

1. AGHS
2. Bolo Bhi
3. Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD)
4. Digital Rights Foundation (DRF)
5. Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA)
6. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
7. Freedom Network (FN)
8. Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF)
9. Bytes for All
10. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)
11. Women Democratic Front

Individuals

1. Muhammad Aftab Alam, Advocate
2. Iqbal Khattak, veteran journalist
3. Adnan Rehmat, media analyst
4. Shafique Chaudhry, Executive Director, Parliamentarians Commission for Human Rights (PCHR)
5. Haroon Baloch, Media & Digital Rights Expert
6. Usama Khilji
7. Zoya Rehman, Women Democratic Front
8. Abdullah Nizamani, Lawyer
9. Zohra Yusuf, Council member HRCP
10. Salima Hashmi, Council member HRCP
11. Imdad Khoso, Journalist and Council member HRCP
12. Ammar Rashid, Awami Workers Party
13. Zeeshan Ahmed, Awami Workers Party