

Pakistan cyber bill threatens free speech, privacy: rights groups

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN: International rights organisations including Human Rights Watch on Monday urged Pakistan's parliament to reject a proposed cyber crime bill that they said threatened freedom of expression and privacy...



Parliament in Islamabad. Critics of the proposed bill say it is too vaguely worded and gives too much power to the government to censor what it doesn't like, for whatever reason. (Image: Public Domain)

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2015, which was approved last week by a committee and is set to go before a parliamentary vote, contains provisions that allows the government to censor content and criminalise net activity under what critics have described as overly broad criteria.

The bill also permits government authorities access to the data of Internet users without any form of judicial review process, according to the statement that was co-signed by Privacy International, Digital Rights Foundation, Article 19 and others.

"The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act bill neither protects the public from legitimate online security concerns nor respects fundamental human rights," said Phelim Kine, HRW's Asia division director.

Unacceptable

"In its present form, Pakistan's cybercrime prevention bill will instead institutionalise unacceptable violations of basic rights with a thin veneer of legality."

The rights groups also expressed concern over a provision that allows the government to share intelligence with foreign spy agencies, such as the United States' National Security Agency, and the mandating of service providers to retain telephone and email records for up to a year.

One of the most controversial sections authorises the blocking of content if the government considers it "necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality."

Another section, entitled "spoofing", appears to criminalise satire with a three-year jail sentence. Gul Bukhari, a Pakistani digital rights activist, said the wording of the bill in its present form was too vague.

Giving the government a free hand to censor as it wishes

"What is against the glory of Islam, what is against relations with foreign countries, what is obscene, what is immoral? It is all up to a designated agency, not a court," she said.

"This literally gives the government a free hand to be able to censor anything as it wants to."

She added the bill potentially criminalised the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) which many Pakistanis use to circumvent a ban on YouTube that has been in place since 2012, as well as any form of encryption software.

Free speech campaigners in Pakistan have long complained of creeping censorship in the name of protecting religion or preventing obscenity. In November 2011 the telecommunications authority tried to ban nearly 1,700 "obscene" words from text messages, which included innocuous terms such as "lotion", "athlete's foot" and "idiot".

In 2010, Pakistan shut down Facebook for nearly two weeks over its hosting of allegedly blasphemous pages. It continues to restrict thousands of online links.

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge, via I-Net Bridge

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