

Pakistan

Building on past attempts to filter blasphemous content, the Pakistan government expanded and intensified its Internet censorship campaign in February 2006, initiated in response to the Danish cartoons that depicted images of the Prophet Muhammad.¹ In addition to the Supreme Court ban on publishing or posting sites deemed to be presenting blasphemous material, the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) has filtered content determined to be irredentist, secessionist, antistate, or anti-military.



Background

Press freedom in Pakistan is restricted by the military-run government, headed by General Pervez Musharraf since 1999. In addition to applying military control over the judiciary and the ruling party in Parliament, print and electronic media have been censored where the content is deemed to be antigovernment or anti-Islamic. Government repression of media is particularly acute with regard to Balochi and Sindhi political autonomy, content considered blasphemous, and other antistate or antireligious content. A vibrant civil

society movement working against Internet censorship continues to operate within Pakistan and monitors all developments in URL blocking.² International human rights groups have reported on the persecution of journalists at the hands of the Pakistani military intelligence agency.³

Internet in Pakistan

Internet usage in 2005 was reported to be 10.5 million users, with a 6.8 percent penetration rate.⁴ According to September 2006 estimates, there are approximately twelve million Internet users in Pakistan, at a 7.2 percent penetration rate.⁵ Pakistan has experienced considerable growth in its information communications technology (ICT)

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political			●		
Social				●	
Conflict/security					●
Internet tools			●		

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency			●	
Consistency		●		

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

sector; in 2003 the government deregulated its telecom market, opening itself up to corporate competition in telephone, mobile, and Internet services.⁶ Internet access is widely available at cybercafés, which accommodate many lower-income and casual users. Rates for usage range from USD0.15/hour to upward of USD0.50/hour, depending on location and amenities. Although the Net Café Regulation Bill 2006 requires Internet cafés to monitor their patrons, there is currently no effective mechanism to verify compliance or enforce this law.⁷ Although Net café managers are expected to monitor the activities in their establishments, based on user experience these cafés appear to be unregulated by the regular police.

Since deregulation the market has become highly competitive, and there are currently over thirty Internet service providers (ISPs) in Pakistan of varying size and quality of service. The largest ISPs in the country include Cybernet, Comsats, Brainnet, Gonet, and Paknet (a subsidiary of the Pakistan Telecommunications Company Limited, or PTCL). Modem, DSL, and recently high-speed Internet service are all available in Pakistan, but the reliability of these connections remains low. The majority of home Internet users are connect-

ed by modem, while cybercafés tend to split one modem or DSL connection over many computers, reducing connection speed. High-speed Internet service is currently accessible only to wealthier patrons or businesses.

All Internet traffic in and out of Pakistan is routed by the PTCL through its subsidiary, the Pakistan Internet Exchange (PIE), with three international gateways at Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi, and small/medium points of presence (POPs) in six other cities.⁸ Currently, PIE handles 2,324 Mb/s of IP backbone traffic that comes to Pakistan using SMT4s on SMW4 and STM1s on SMW3 connected with BT, France Telecom, Telecom Italia, Verizon, and so on.⁹ Bandwidth through FLAG Telecom in collaboration with PTCL is at 620 Mb/s. Domestic Internet traffic is peered at the PIE gateways within the country. The PIE's Karachi exchange reportedly processes at least 95 percent of Pakistan's Internet traffic.¹⁰

Bloggers across Pakistan objected to the intermittent block on www.blogspot.com and the temporary blocking of Wikipedia in 2006, and initiated a virtual civil society movement to repeal the orders.¹¹ This virtual civil society engages in awareness and advocacy work on Pakistan's

Internet censorship through up-to-date blogs, as well as by posting information on Wikipedia. Through these sites, users share a multitude of techniques to circumvent the URL block and continue to access their Web sites of choice. An example of this is the use of www.pkblogs.com to access and post on banned www.blogspot.com sites.

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Internet censorship in Pakistan is legally regulated by the PTA, under the directive of the government, the Supreme Court of Pakistan, and the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MITT). The PTA implements its censorship regulations through directives handed down to the PTCL,¹² of which the Emirates Telecommunications Corporation (Etisalat) took majority control in 2006.¹³

In February 2002 the PTA challenged the legality of the use of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) as a replacement for long-distance calls. Because VoIP has achieved considerable popularity as a cost-effective alternative to long-distance calls, the PTCL banned VoIP and voice chat Web sites in early 2002; the service was undermining revenues for outgoing long-distance phone calls to the United States.¹⁴

In January 2003 the MITT directed the PTCL to block pornographic and blasphemous sites by placing content filters at all Internet exchanges,¹⁵ an effort that was not entirely effective.¹⁶ In March 2004 the Federal Investigation Agency also ordered all ISPs to block pornographic Web sites, a task beyond the technical capability of the ISPs at the time.¹⁷

On February 28, 2006, the PTCL issued a blocking directive banning a dozen URLs determined to have posted controversial Danish cartoons depicting images of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁸ Within two weeks in March, in a series of escalating instructions, the Supreme Court directed the government to block all Web sites displaying the cartoons; to explain why they had

not been blocked earlier; to block all blasphemous content; and to determine how access to such content could be denied on the Internet worldwide.¹⁹ The Supreme Court also ordered police to register cases of publishing or posting the blasphemous images under Article 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, where blasphemy or defamation of the Prophet Muhammad is punishable by death.²⁰ Desecration or derogation of the Quran is punishable by life imprisonment.²¹

On September 2, 2006, the MITT announced the creation of a committee to monitor content of offensive Web sites. According to the Ministry statement, "the committee, headed by the secretary of the MITT, will examine contents of websites reported or found to be offensive and containing anti-state material."²² To address the grievances of Internet users with this censorship body, the government set up a Deregulation Facilitation Unit to deal with users' complaints.²³

ONI testing results

ONI field testing was conducted on Brainnet, Cybernet, and Paknet ISPs. Testing results showed that blacklisted URLs were blocked at either the ISP or PIE level, or at both locations. The PTCL has implemented a limited, perhaps symbolic, block on pornography and religious conversion sites. However, more aggressive efforts have been made to target content regarding Balochi independence movements, Sindhi human rights and political autonomy movements, material considered blasphemous, antigovernment material, and anti-Islamic materials, though a clear pattern or criteria for what is filtered is lacking. Among these categories, Web sites depicting blasphemous content or addressing Balochi political independence were the most comprehensively blocked.

Because one of the twelve Web sites identified as depicting the Danish cartoons was hosted on Blogspot, the PTCL used a blocking mechanism that filtered the entire www.blogspot.com domain. As a result of this strategy, thousands of

personal blogs hosted on www.blogspot.com were inadvertently filtered for most of 2006. Most material relating to the Danish cartoon incident was blocked by the ISPs; only one Web site containing the cartoons that was reportedly blocked (www.danishcartoons.ytmnd.com) was found to be fully accessible through the testing process.

By April 2006 the PTA extended their blocking to antistate Web sites as well as those promoting Balochi human rights and political autonomy.²⁴ ONI testing confirmed that internal security conflicts were a strong focus for filtering; all Web sites tested relating to independence (for example, www.balochunitedfront.org) and human rights (for example, www.balochestan.com) in the province of Balochistan were blocked, as well as selected sites promoting Sindhi political autonomy and human rights. Notably, though Balochi and Sindhi independence and human rights sites have been filtered, the few existing Web sites pertaining to Pashtun secessionism were fully accessible. This may be because the majority of Pashtuns are illiterate in their local language, and secessionist politics in the northwest frontier province are significantly less potent than in Balochistan and Sindh provinces. Therefore the more politically organized Balochi and Sindhi movements arguably pose a greater threat to the central government than these selected pro-Pashtunist Web sites.

In addition to blasphemous, secessionist, and human rights Web sites, a variety of blogs and Web sites containing anti-Islamic and anti-Pakistani content were blacklisted, such as Indian militant extremist sites (www.hinduunity.com) and anti-Islamic blogs (www.jihadwatch.com). A number of less polemical Web sites, including personal blogs hosted on www.blogspot.com, and Web sites dedicated to promoting religious tolerance (www.faithfreedom.com) were also blocked.

ONI testing showed that the majority of newspapers and independent media, circumvention tools, international human rights groups,

VoIP services, civil society groups, minority religious sites, Indian and Hindu human rights groups, Pakistani political parties, and sexual content (including pornography and gay and lesbian content) were accessible on all three ISPs. Pornographic content was largely accessible, with only symbolic blocking of selected sites. Civil society groups contend that all www.blogspot.com sites have been blocked; however, ONI testing found the site for the “Don’t Block the Blog” campaign (www.help-pakistan.com) to be accessible on all three ISPs.

The lack of technical sophistication of the PTCL explains the comprehensive block on Blogspot. The PTCL lacks the capacity to target the specific URLs that contain offensive content and simply blocks the entire IP address on which the offending site was hosted. Although this filtering system has resulted in the collateral blocking of entire domains such as www.blogspot.com, the rudimentary nature of the blocking mechanism also makes it easier for users to circumvent the block using proxy servers or other bypassing methods.²⁵ Not only is the PTCL charged with blocking blacklisted URLs, but it also hands down blocking directives directly to the ISPs to implement. The ISPs then implement, or attempt to implement, the blocking orders; the results of the ONI testing show that this sometimes led to a redundancy in blocking at both the ISP level and the central Internet exchange point.

Conclusion

Currently Pakistanis have unimpeded access to most sexual, political, social, and religious content. However, the Pakistani government continues to use repressive measures against antimilitary, Balochi, and Sindhi political dissidents, and it blocks Web sites highlighting this repression. The government also filters high-risk antistate materials and blasphemous content.

The Pakistani government does not currently employ a sophisticated blocking system, nor does the government have a coherent policy on

what sites should be blacklisted. The recently established ministerial committee will probably contribute to the development of a comprehensive framework for government censorship as methods for implementing blocking directives are refined. Civil society activists and cyber-dissidents continue to advocate for free expression and blogging rights, which are curtailed by crude blocking methods that have imposed blanket blocks on entire domains such as www.blogspot.com.

NOTES

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