

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/pakistan-sindh-high-court-orders-government-24-04-2012,41977.html>

Asia - Pakistan

Online censorship

Sindh high court orders government to stop censoring websites illegally

24 April 2012

Reporters Without Borders welcomes the ruling that the high court of the southeastern province of Sindh issued in response to a joint petition on 17 April by Bolo Bhi, a Pakistani civil rights group, and other human rights activists in a bid to stop illegal website censorship by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA).

According to a Bolo Bhi [press release](#), the petition asked the court to ensure that no website was blocked, censored or restricted in violation of articles 4, 9, 10-A, 18, 19, 19-A, 20 and 25 of Pakistan's Constitution.

After examining the petition, the high court served notice on the federal government and ordered the PTA not to block any website except in accordance with the provisions of the [Pakistan Telecommunication Act of 1996](#). This law regulates the PTA's control of telecommunications networks and requires, inter alia, that this control be exercised in a fair and transparent manner.

The high court's ruling, if respected, would make it impossible for the government to introduce any nationwide website filtering system.

While welcoming the ruling, which penalizes the lack of transparency in the PTA's past website blocking, Reporters Without Borders calls for vigilance because the PTA could try to circumvent it by devising a constitutional procedure based on the anti-blasphemy law and national security provisions.

10 NGOs seek commitment by Pakistani authorities to scrap Internet filtering plans

04.04.2012

On the initiative of the Pakistani human rights organization Bolo Bhi, 10 NGOs including Reporters Without Borders have signed an open letter to the Pakistani prime minister and the minister of information technology asking for a public commitment to withdraw plans to install a national Internet filtering and blocking system.

The letter was prompted by an [interview](#) with National Assembly Member Bushra Gohar by Bolo Bhi, in which she reported that the secretary of the information and technology ministry, Farooq Awan, had given a verbal commitment to shelve the plan.

The same information was also reported in the daily [Express Tribune](#). On 30 March, the human

rights organization with a focus on Information and Communication Technologies, Bytes for All, cast doubt on the article and suggested it was a "[strategic move to put an end to the raging protests](#)".

Click here to read the letter: [Global Coalition Of NGOs Call For Official Withdrawal Of Pakistan Censorship Plans](#)

Les ONG signataires : [Access Now](#), [ARTICLE 19](#), [Bolo Bhi](#), [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), [Center for Democracy & Technology](#), [Citizen Lab](#) , [CPJ](#), [Global Voices Advocacy](#), [Index on Censorship](#) and [Reporters Without Borders](#).

Government wants to create national Internet filtering system

02.03.2012

Reporters Without Borders wrote today to Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani, the information technology minister and the head of the National ICT Research and Development Fund, which is attached to the ministry, to voice its opposition to a proposed national Internet filtering and blocking system.

According to the [Daily Times](#), several international companies have already responded to the Fund's 2 February [invitation to submit bids](#) for the creation of the system, which is expected to cost 10 million dollars. Reporters Without Borders urges these companies not to cooperate with Pakistan's censors and not become the government's accomplices in the creation of an electronic barrier.

A [petition](#) has been launched online urging international companies not to respond to the Fund's request for bids.

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani
Minister in charge of the Ministry of Information Technology (MoIT)

Dr. Mohammed Yaseen
Chairman of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority

Dr. Syed Aun Abbas
CEO, National ICT R&D Fund

Paris, 2 March 2012,

Dear Prime Minister Gillani, Dear Dr. Yaseen, Dear Dr. Abbas,

Reporters Without Borders, an international organization that defends freedom of information, would like express its deep concern about the invitation that was issued on 2 February to private-sector companies and research institutions to bid for the creation of a "National URL Filtering and Blocking System" intended to block access to millions of "undesirable" websites.

In your specifications, you say that the system should be able to block "undesirable" content by Domain Name Server (DNS) and using Deep Packet Inspection (DPI); that it "should be capable of URL filtering and blocking, from domain level to subfolder, file levels and file types," and that it "should be able to block a single IP address or a range of IP addresses."

Reporters Without Borders urges you to abandon this project, which would reinforce the arsenal of measures for communications surveillance and Internet censorship that have already been put in place by your government.

The invitation to bid says that currently "Internet access in Pakistan is mostly unrestricted and unfiltered." We would like to point out that thousands of websites are nonetheless already blocked

in Pakistan. The [draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance](#), under which the dissemination of content hostile to the government can be blocked, is a measure for restricting access to information which we regard as abusive.

Some opposition websites, especially those of the Baloch community, have been made inaccessible on the basis of this law. The blasphemy law also has an impact on online free expression. The social network Facebook and the [video-sharing platform YouTube](#) were already entirely blocked (in May 2010 and February 2008 respectively) because of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

We would like stress our opposition to Internet filtering on principle. This is a position shared by Frank La Rue, the UN special rapporteur for the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression. In a recent report, he recommended that the flow of information online should be restricted only in specific, exceptional and limited circumstances, and in accordance with international standards. He also said that the right to freedom of expression should be the norm and restrictions should be the exception, and not the other way round.

Aside from the obvious impact it has on Internet connection speed, Internet filtering always entails real risks of "overblocking," in which flaws in the filtering mechanism can render sites that are not targeted inaccessible. We would therefore like to know more about the type of content that this system is intended to target.

The adjective "undesirable" used in the invitation to bid is very vague and, above all, subjective. On what legal bases are you planning to block access to information for 20 million Pakistani Internet users? Furthermore, how will you be able to guarantee that the Deep Packet Inspection technology – which permits interception of all kinds of communication, including emails, phone calls, photos and messages posted on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter – will not be misused to monitor Internet users and hunt down dissidents?

We regard the creation of a system with so much surveillance capacity as particularly worrying at a time of growing physical danger for the media in Pakistan that is partly due to government intelligence and security agencies, which could decide to use these technologies.

You say the list of "undesirable" websites would be encrypted and accessible only to the staff responsible for compiling the blacklist database. This would constitute a disproportionate concentration of power. It would assign sole control over the Internet filtering to a group which would not be not subject to any control or democratic accountability and which would be able to make decisions in a completely non-transparent manner.

This national Internet filtering project must be abandoned because it violates the fundamental rights of your fellow-citizens, including online freedom of information and respect for privacy.

We thank in advance for the attention you give to our request and we look forward to a favourable response.

Sincerely,

Olivier Basille Reporters Without Borders director
