

## **Internet censorship in Pakistan**

**In February 2012**, the ministry of information technology issued a request for tenders for a national-level URL filtering system. The request, from the ministry's Research and Development Fund, specified that the system must be capable of blocking websites at the domain and subdomain levels and of filtering specific files, file types and IP addresses.

A petition by the digital rights organization Access called on providers of network filtering technology to state publicly that they would not tender for the contract. The petition won support among the main information technology companies, but five – the Chinese firms Huawei and ZTE, Blue Coat and McAfee based in the United States and Canada's Netsweeper – refused to comment.

Previously, the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), which monitors Internet filtering and surveillance, had found proof in the course of its research that blasphemous and anti-Islamic content was being filtered in Pakistan, as were sites promoting the rights of Baloch, Sindhi and Pashtun minorities (see the [ONI report on Pakistan](#) dated 6 August 2012).

Blasphemous content has been posted on major sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and the Pakistani authorities have on several occasions blocked the entire domains. Twitter and Facebook were eventually unblocked, but YouTube remains inaccessible. The authorities have also shut down all communication in the name of internal security.

On Pakistan's national day in 2012, the authorities cut cell phone communications in Balochistan for 14 hours. They were suspended again throughout the region several months later.

**In April 2012**, a group of human rights activists filed a petition with the Sindh High Court contesting excessive website censorship by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). The court examined the petition and served notice on the federal government, ordering the PTA not to block any websites except in accordance with 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.

Reporters Without Borders welcomed the ruling, which penalized the lack of transparency in the blocking of websites by the PTA.

**On 17 September 2012**, former prime minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf ordered the blocking of access to YouTube after the site showed the trailer for the film *The Innocence of Muslims*, considered blasphemous by many, which triggered a wave of protests throughout the Islamic world.

Google, the parent company of YouTube, blocked access to the video in response to requests from several governments, including Egypt, Libya, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and India. However, the site itself was blocked in Pakistan where Google has no representation and had no means of withdrawing the video. The Pakistani government decided to block the entire site through local Internet service providers.

**On 2 May 2013**, Twitter users reported that access to the Tumblr website had been blocked in some parts of Pakistan, including Balochistan and Sindh.

**On 28 May 2013**, a court in Peshawar ordered the authorities to block Facebook pages containing blasphemous content. A division bench comprising Chief Justice Dost Muhammad Khan and Justice Qaiser Rashid of the Peshawar High Court requested a response from the ministry of religious affairs, the ministry of information and broadcasting, the intelligence services and the PTA to a petition filed by the lawyer Arif Jan.

The court ordered the PTA to block the pages within three days and required the authorities concerned to submit their responses within 20 days.

Jan told journalists he refused to give out the links in open court because he feared this might spark protests and cause political and religious parties to try to score points with the public. (Online freedom in Pakistan is continually subjected to close scrutiny by the courts).

**On 8 June 2013**, the new government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided to implement an Internet filtering system before lifting the YouTube ban. It said the removal of the ban on YouTube and the implementation of a system to filter blasphemous and pornographic content were among its priorities.

Although the information technology secretary Zafar Iqbal had criticized the PTA for failing to implement a filtering system that would allow access to YouTube again, the new information and technology minister, Anusha Rahman Khan rejected this argument, saying the ministry had had nine months in which to take action.

*"PTA is just an enforcement body. Our ministry is responsible for policy decisions, so it's our job to ensure reopening of YouTube as soon as possible with thorough screening of objectionable material. I will immediately start work on it after a presentation by ministry officials on Monday,"* Khan was quoted as saying by the daily *The News*.

The ministry said the government would do all it could to ensure an appropriate Internet filtering system was implemented to allow YouTube to reopen.

*"We will pump in extra money if needed and do whatever is in our capacity to bring YouTube back to Pakistan without compromising our ethical values,"* Khan said, adding that she would ask Google to remove offensive content from the site, or at least prevent it being accessed in Pakistan.

*"If they persist with their stance, we can block Google in Pakistan as a last resort as there are many alternative search engines available on the web."*

The minister gave an assurance that YouTube would not be accessible before a block on content considered offensive had been implemented.

Iqbal had told *The News* earlier that the delay in lifting the ban on YouTube was caused by the PTA's inability to deploy a filtering system.

**On 28 June 2013**, the Peshawar High Court bench comprising Chief Justice Dost Muhammad Khan and Justice Asadullah Khan Chamkani summoned officials and experts from the PTA over the YouTube ban. The bench was hearing a petition seeking to reopen YouTube.

On 27 June, the court heard that YouTube was used mainly for academic and research purposes. Lawyer Mian Muhibullah Kakakhel told the bench students faced immense problems searching for content related to their studies and requested the court to instruct the authorities to filter the blasphemous material and reopen YouTube. The court ordered the PTA to respond to the petition within 20 days.

At the same time, technical experts were also summoned to help the court determine whether unwanted content could be filtered out.

The bench maintained that, if the PTA did not have the expertise, there was no reason experts from other countries could not be entrusted with blocking blasphemous content before it reached the general public.

According to a [report by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab](#), published in June this year jointly with the NGO Bytes for All, Netsweeper filtering products had been installed on Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL)'s network. PTCL is Pakistan's largest telecommunications company and also operates the Pakistan Internet Exchange Point.

It offers broadband Internet connectivity to over one million subscribers, along with Transworld Associates (TWA), and accounted for 60 percent of broadband market share in 2012.

This formerly government-owned ISP was privatized in 2006, with the government of Pakistan retaining a 62 percent stake in the company.

Etisalat International Pakistan, a subsidiary of the UAE-based Emirates Telecommunication Company Corporation, owns an additional 26 percent stake and effectively controls the management of the company.

The Citizen Lab used the computer search engine Shodan, which lists IP addresses of externally visible devices on the Internet, to search for Netsweeper installations on networks in Pakistan and discovered a Netsweeper installation on PTCL.

The report said the technology was being implemented for the purposes of political and social filtering, including websites relating to human rights, sensitive religious topics, and independent media. Pakistani ISPs also used other less transparent methods, such as DNS tampering.