

GNI Statement on Ongoing Digital Repression in Pakistan

The Global Network Initiative (GNI), a multistakeholder organization focused on freedom of expression and privacy in the technology sector, expresses deep concern regarding recent digital regulation proposals amidst [continued monitoring and restriction of internet access](#) and social media services in Pakistan. According to recent [news reports](#), the Pakistan authorities are considering amendments to the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), introducing additional, broadly defined categories for unlawful content, expanding the scope of the law's application, and placing strict requirements for social media companies to comply with these demands. The proposed amendments would reportedly criminalize sharing "fake news," with a punishment of up to five years in jail, in addition to establishing a so-called "Digital Rights Protection Authority," with the government appointing the chairperson and three of the six members.

GNI encourages the Pakistan government to reconsider this rushed approach and undertake open, transparent, and multistakeholder consultations to inform effective, fit-for-purpose, and [rights-respecting](#) regulation.

GNI has been following relevant legal and regulatory developments in Pakistan for [several years](#). GNI has [repeatedly raised concern](#) about the lack of public consultation on legal measures, the scope of provisions in these proposals, and efforts to create broad and unchecked powers for Pakistan authorities that are likely to lead to significant risks to privacy and freedom of expression.

While this is [not the first time Pakistan](#) has considered plans to amend the cybercrime law, recent efforts to regulate digital content and disrupt access to digital services in Pakistan continue to be difficult to reconcile with internationally recognized principles of necessity and proportionality. Continuing its pattern of bypassing a transparent and consultative process, the Pakistan government has not made the latest iteration of the proposed PECA amendments public. According to [media reports](#), with these amendments, the government aims to expand the definition of social media services by including "website," "application," and "communication channel" that allow people to access social media and post content. The amendments also apply to "any person managing a system that allows access to social media." This is particularly alarming given Pakistan's recent attempts to require [VPN registration](#), following a spike in VPN usage in the country due to frequent disruptions to the internet and social media applications.

GNI shares concerns expressed by [local stakeholders](#) about the potential for these proposed authorities and broad provisions to be used to restrict speech that discusses or is critical of the State and State actors. The amendments also reportedly extend the scope of unlawful content to

include sixteen different scenarios, including “fake or false information” and “aspersion” against constitutional institutions and their officers, including the judiciary and the armed forces. These and other changes proposed in the amendments can lead to significant impacts on freedom of opinion, expression, and press in Pakistan and add to the concerns GNI has [previously expressed](#) about the increased pressures on technology companies to comply with these demands.

At a time when internet speeds have dropped by [more than 30%](#) in Pakistan and the country [reportedly](#) leads the world in financial losses suffered due to internet and social media outages, GNI urges the Pakistani government to act consistently with its international obligations and avoid creating disproportionate economic and social consequences by placing more stringent controls on the internet. Pakistan is bound by the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which provides for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information. We urge the government to engage in meaningful dialogue, be transparent about its plans and capabilities to monitor and throttle the internet, exercise restraint in blocking access to communications, and undergo thorough and transparent public consultation in advance of any future content regulation efforts.