**Singling out TikTok**

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Pakistan is a strange country when it comes to the digital sphere. No, really: we allow social media platforms to operate in this region only to subsequently ban them for reasons unbeknown to everyone.

The platforms are told by the authorities as to how they are violating the country’s law, norms, values and culture, and directed to address issues or face a permanent ban. Of course, these platforms realise how big a market Pakistan is, and how they would be missing out on a big chunk of potential audience in case of non-compliance.

So, in order to continue operating here, they do not only remove any and all objectionable content but also set up teams that actively moderate the content uploaded on the app – only to get banned again by the authorities.

And in this nobody but TikTok bears the brunt all the time. In a recent hearing at the Islamabad High Court (IHC), a judge remarked that the ban on the short-video app was unjustified and asked the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) about the law under which it had banned TikTok.

Banned for the fourth time in the last 10 months – on the first day of Eidul Azha on this occasion after the president of Pakistan had announced that he was now on TikTok – it can be safely argued that the app is being scrutinised more than other social media platforms. Even the judge is said to have commented that it looked as if the video-sharing app was being targeted specifically for unknown reasons.

Despite having set up dedicated content moderation teams and removing more than six million objectionable videos on its own only in the first quarter of 2021, the platform continues to face chin music by the PTA.

That we are happy to penalise and ban a platform that is taking preemptive measures is quite telling of how things usually work in our country. We have a history of allowing violators to roam free and punishing those who abide by the law of the land.

By banning these apps, the relevant authorities are not only sending out a message that Pakistan remains a volatile country when it comes to investing in its digital infrastructure and thereby boosting its economy, but are also hurting the livelihood of several creators who have worked hard to earn monetary opportunities on TikTok.

Think of it this way: your office is located right at the end of a long road that starts from your house. You get in your car, turn on the ignition, put your foot on the gas, and off you go. Sounds good, right? Well, that’s how other social media apps operate in Pakistan.

In TikTok’s case, not only do you have to walk to your office, but the road is excavated too. You might put in the effort to walk to your office for a few weeks at best, but chances are that you will end up quitting that job.

TikTok is the only app that takes the local laws, culture and norms of Pakistan into consideration when giving space to content on its platform. Yet, unfair treatment is meted out to it, by the authorities. That it is still willing to work in collaboration with the government of Pakistan is a clear indication that the app takes the laws seriously and wants a solution that works in favour of both the company and the authorities.

Better sense should prevail and the ban on TikTok should be lifted. It might encourage other platforms to invest in Pakistan as well.

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