[**Suppressing voices**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1607644/suppressing-voices)

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The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

THE suspension of Twitter accounts in Pakistan and India of late signifies the deep tensions between internet companies and governments, with the interests of citizens seemingly tertiary.

In Pakistan, reportedly over 280 accounts posting about the Kashmiri people’s right to self-determination were suspended a day after Kashmir Day was observed in Pakistan. It is noteworthy that the PTA (that claimed the move came at India’s behest) has written to Twitter in protest, asking for the restoration of the accounts suspended “under Indian influence” and that were “depriving Pakistani users of their fundamental rights”.

It is important that Twitter acts transparently and publicises the pretext under which these accounts were suspended.

This is not the first time that a social media platform has been accused of censoring voices sympathetic to the struggle of the Kashmiris. It is indeed concerning that freedom-oriented movements in internationally recognised occupied territories such as Kashmir and Palestine are often censored on the internet at the behest of powerful oppressors. A lot of the time this has to do with the legal enforcement of requests from governments, often complied with by platforms because of the international designation of freedom groups as ‘terrorist networks’ — a perfect case of ‘one’s freedom fighter is another’s terrorist’.

Twitter must act transparently.

But many movements, political parties and governments also indulge in ‘platform manipulation and spam’, which includes the use of fake accounts, artificial amplification or disruption of conversations through multiple accounts or coordination with others, artificially inflating one’s own or others’ following or engagement, manipulating hashtags, etc.

Hopefully, PTA’s concern about the violation of Pakistani internet users’ rights will translate into a meaningful revision by the government of the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules, 2020, currently under review by the attorney general’s office at the direction of the Islamabad High Court chief justice who called the Rules prima facie violative of Article 19 and 19-A of the Constitution. It is also hoped this will lead to a reduction in requests from the government to social media platforms to censor accounts of Pakistani activists, journalists and academics as has been happening over the past few years.

In India, a battle between the government and Twitter is ensuing in light of the farmers’ protest. The Indian government asked for over 1,000 Twitter accounts to be suspended for “spreading misinformation” about the farmers’ protests against proposed agriculture laws. Twitter suspended them under Section 69-A of India’s IT Act that enables online censorship under the garb of maintaining “public order and national security”, but later restored most of them, arguing that they determined the restricted content does not violate the law. The Indian government sent Twitter a notice of non-compliance, which threatens jail terms for Twitter employees in India and hefty fines for the company.

Whereas there has been support for the Indian protesters in Pakistan, dual standards have been exhibited. Mobile networks were shut down in Peshawar recently on account of a gathering — a peaceful one — by the PTM. Several activists and journalists have had their social media accounts suspended here, and received emails from social media platforms like Twitter notifying them of requests from the Pakistani government asking for their suspension.

Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (Peca), 2016, is very similar to India’s section 69-A of the IT Act. Pakistan’s Removal and Blocking of Online Content Rules, 2020, under Section 37 stipulate very similar repercussions for companies that do not comply with censorship req­u­ests from the government. It is important that while the attorney general’s office works to revise the Rules, the government denotify them as questions have been raised by the IHC. At the same time, parliamentary committees on human rights and IT should initiate the process to amend the draconian Section 37 of Peca that enables state censorship when protections from harm exist in the rest of the law.

Our condemnation of India for violation of human rights is welcome, but it would be a strategic mistake and inconsistent with Pakistan’s principles if the government were to violate the rights of its own citizens.

At the same time, Twitter should be more transparent about actions taken against accounts across the world, not only in jurisdictions where it has offices. It should continue to push for greater allowance of freedom of speech rather than acceding to government demands even momentarily, while establishing norms in line with international human rights law and centred on user rights.

Governments and companies should remember that banning speech on deep-rooted issues does not solve them.

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