

Analyzing Digital Rights Violations in Pakistan: Case Studies of Internet Shutdowns and Online Censorship by Government

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the legal and institutional frameworks regulating digital information in Pakistan and their impact on fundamental rights like freedom of expression and access to information. It examines key laws such as the (PECA) and the Telecommunication Act, highlighting their influence on digital space and potential misuse. The role of government bodies like the (PTA) and non-governmental organizations in shaping digital rights is also analysed, alongside challenges such as internet shutdowns, online censorship, and mass surveillance. These gaps underscore the urgency of aligning Pakistan's digital policies with global norms to uphold the principles of freedom, equality, and democratic participation in the digital age. This research emphasizes the far-reaching effects of digital restrictions on democracy, public discourse, and economic activity. It advocates for a balanced approach to digital governance that respects constitutional freedoms while addressing legitimate security concerns. By proposing practical reforms, the thesis aims to contribute to building a more inclusive, transparent, and equitable digital environment for all in Pakistan.



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1. Introduction

Digital rights refer to human rights in the context of digital technology and include freedom of speech, privacy among others, right to information. Given that global digital population is put at 5.35 billion (Wagner, 2018a).¹ Of such rights are becoming more important to plug in the reasonable equalization of the opportunity for presence on the digital platforms and freedom. Internet is a device that enables people to voice opinions and to obtain information. Besides, people are also involved in communication that occurs all over the global village. But again, shielding from spying and subsequent misuse of collected data by other individuals is still among the primary objectives. A person's digital rights ensure that they are permitted to go online or have their rights infringed on Internet. About the beginning of the year 2024, the number of Internet users in Pakistan was expected to equal 111.0 million because it was 45.7 % of the overall population. Mobile technology has enhanced the usage of internet the majority of the users use mobile handset as the only source to access the internet. Nevertheless, there are still some shortcomings of the present study as follows; poor connectivity and access to internet in rural areas; low computer literacy; and some legal challenges arising from the passage of rules such as the PECA 2016. For instance, Digital Pakistan that intends to enhance digital governance and innovation together with connectivity. Hence, this thesis looks at digital rights in the modern society especially focusing on the case of the emerging digital economy of Pakistan. It will use the understanding of the six core concepts identified above, to analyse, how freedom of expression, privacy and equal accesses to information are constructed in the digital conditions. It also takes stock of the implications of law and of its difficulties occasioned by the PECA; it avails itself of the push given by reflecting on the digital divide between the urban and the rural, and low rate of literacy on the digital. By pointing at these problems, the research aims at adding more information to the theoretical understanding of how digital rights could be used in order to facilitate better and more collective and safe use of internet.

2. Literature Review

In the article "Digital Authoritarianism and Activism for Digital Rights in Pakistan," Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Ihsan Yilmaz, Shahram Akbarzadeh, and Galib Bashirov delve into the intricate dynamics of digital authoritarianism in Pakistan, juxtaposed with the burgeoning movement for digital rights. The authors explore how the Pakistani government employs digital tools to exert control over the populace, utilizing tactics such as surveillance, censorship, and internet shutdowns to suppress dissent and monitor citizens.(Yilmaz et al., 2022). This exploration is critical for understanding the broader implications of

governmental control on digital spaces and the resultant impact on civil liberties and democratic engagement. The article provides a thorough examination of the resistance from civil society, highlighting the efforts of activists and organizations striving to protect digital rights and freedom of expression. These insights are particularly relevant for analysing the regulatory framework in Pakistan, as the authors provide comparative perspectives with global standards, offering a lens through which to assess the effectiveness of Pakistan's policies. The discussion also underscores the significant role of international bodies and local NGOs in advocating for digital rights, which is crucial for understanding the interplay between authoritarian practices and resistance movements in digital governance.

Yasir Abbas, in his article "Digital Media Regulatory Landscape," presents a comprehensive overview of the regulatory environment governing digital media in Pakistan. Abbas meticulously outlines the evolution of digital media regulations, tracing the historical context and the current legal frameworks that shape the digital landscape. He delves into specific laws and policies, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), and their implications for media freedom and user privacy. This article is essential for understanding the complexities and challenges faced by digital media entities in navigating the regulatory terrain. Abbas provides a critical analysis of the enforcement mechanisms and the role of regulatory bodies like the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), offering insights into how these regulations affect the operations of digital media platforms and the rights of users. By comparing Pakistan's regulatory practices with international standards, Abbas highlights gaps and areas for improvement, thereby informing a nuanced discussion on policy reform and the need for a balanced approach that protects user rights while ensuring regulatory compliance.

(Akram & Safdar, 2025). This civil society submission underscores the restrictive measures imposed by the Pakistani government to control online content, which often infringe upon freedom of expression and the right to privacy. The report details various instances of content takedowns, censorship, and the blocking of websites, presenting a stark picture of the digital rights landscape. It also highlights the impact of such regulations on marginalized groups and human rights defenders, who are disproportionately affected by these measures. The report's comprehensive analysis of the legal and institutional framework governing content regulation in Pakistan offers valuable insights into the enforcement mechanisms and the challenges faced by civil society in advocating for digital rights. By situating Pakistan's practices within the broader international human rights context, the report provides a robust foundation for comparative analysis and policy recommendations aimed at safeguarding digital freedoms.

(Abbas et al., 2023a). Abbas provides an in-depth analysis of the legal instruments used to regulate online spaces, focusing on the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and its implications for media freedom and individual privacy. The article explores the balance between national security and individual

rights, critically assessing how government tactics often tilt towards authoritarian control. Abbas also examines case studies of media outlets and journalists who have faced censorship, legal harassment, and digital surveillance. This article is crucial for understanding the broader regulatory landscape and the impact of cyber laws on civil liberties. By drawing comparisons with international norms and standards, Abbas highlights the discrepancies and offers recommendations for legal reforms to enhance freedom of expression and privacy rights in Pakistan.

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(Wagner, 2018b). The study details specific instances of internet shutdowns, examining the justifications provided by the government, such as national security and public order, and their actual implications for citizens' rights and economic activities. The article critically assesses the legal framework that permits such shutdowns, highlighting the lack of transparency and accountability in the decision-making process. It also explores the socio-economic and political consequences of internet shutdowns, particularly on marginalized communities and sectors reliant on digital connectivity. By comparing Pakistan's practices with global standards and best practices; the article provides a comprehensive overview of the issue and suggests pathways for advocating against such draconian measures. This case study is essential for understanding the broader implications of internet shutdowns on digital rights and freedoms, providing a basis for legal and policy advocacy to prevent such occurrences in the future.

The article "Pakistan: Online Harms Rules Violate Freedom of Expression" critically examines the Online Harms Rules introduced by the Pakistani government, arguing that these regulations pose significant threats to freedom of expression.(Abbas et al., 2023b) The authors highlight how these rules empower authorities to compel social media companies to remove or block content deemed harmful, often without clear or transparent criteria. This regulatory approach is scrutinized for its potential to stifle dissent, censor political speech, and restrict access to information. The article delves into the legal and constitutional implications of the Online Harms Rules, emphasizing their inconsistency with international human rights standards. By providing case studies of how these rules have been applied, the authors illustrate the tangible impact on journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens who find their voices suppressed. This piece is pivotal for understanding the broader context of digital regulation in Pakistan, as it underscores the

urgent need for legal reforms that protect freedom of expression while addressing genuine online harms. The comparative analysis with global best practices offers a roadmap for aligning Pakistan's digital regulations with democratic norms and human rights principles.

The article titled "Pakistan's Online Censorship Regime" provides a comprehensive overview of the mechanisms and strategies employed by the Pakistani government to control online content.(Abbas et al., 2023c) It discusses the historical evolution of internet censorship in Pakistan, detailing how various legal instruments and regulatory bodies have been used to monitor, filter, and block digital content. The authors critically assess the role of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) in implementing censorship policies, highlighting instances where content deemed politically sensitive or culturally inappropriate has been targeted. The article also examines the broader implications of such censorship for freedom of expression, access to information, and democratic participation. By analysing specific cases and government actions, the article illustrates the pervasive nature of online censorship and its impact on civil society and media freedoms. It contrasts Pakistan's censorship practices with international norms, advocating for a more transparent, accountable, and rights-respecting approach to content regulation. This analysis is crucial for understanding the current digital governance landscape in Pakistan and offers valuable insights for policy makers, activists, and scholars interested in promoting digital rights and freedoms.

3. Legal Frameworks

The first law regulating digital data in Pakistan is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. It deals with all manner of computer related crimes including computer cracking, cyber harassment and defamation. As per provision of PECA the PTA is legally empowered to remove or delete whatever it deems as obscene to decency, to the state, or to Islam. The thesis stated, though, that it can be abused, and expressed concern that in the name of national security, the EU obstructs freedom of speech by silencing dissent. Another one is the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act, 1996.(Shahid et al., 2007), which established the PTA. The PTA is also charged with the role of overseeing telecommunications services and CIF in the region, including the managing of Internet services. It also censors content on the Internet to suit the national security and public morality of the country and therefore largely defines features of Internet space of Pakistan. The Electronic Transactions Ordinance 2002 lays the legal framework on electronic transactions,(Pun et al., 2002) recognizing the validity of electronic documents and digital signatures. It is critical for the regulation of e-commerce and digital communications, fostering

growth in Pakistan's online business landscape. Additionally, Pakistan is working on a Draft Personal Data Protection Bill (2021), which is designed to protect individual data and ensure that people have control over how their personal information is used. which established the PTA. The PTA is supreme for administration, regulation and supervision of telecommunication services including internet administration. It also polices content that is uploaded on the Internet to accord with national security and public morality, which in general defines the state of Internet in Pakistan. The Electronic Transactions The measure being considered also proposes establishment of Data Protection Authority to monitor and ensure compliance to data protection measures. This step is considered crucial after acquiring user data since Digital platforms are known to gather large amounts of data. These laws and the proposed rules are among the fundamentals of the legal process in Pakistan while containing principles on national security and public morality and the defense of the rights of digital media, yet, it raises questions for present issues of implementing privacy, freedom of speech, as well as the ability of equal access to information in the digital environment. Electronic transactions are governed by the Ordinance 2002.

Despite the importance of the regulation for PECA 2016, several other laws are regulating digital rights in Pakistan. The Pakistan Penal code (PPC) contains laws against defamation of both a physical and an electronic nature, given under section 500. The Defamation Ordinance 2002 further regulates defamation in both traditional and digital media, providing remedies for online harm to reputation. The Right to Information Act of 2017 gives citizens an ability to request public data and promote openness especially in the cyberspace. However, this freedom may be limited, especially if national security, or some governmental interest, is at stake. The legal protection of intellectual property rights in the internet environment on the basis of the Copyright Ordinance of 1962 introduced amendments to cover up the digital information. It helps to fight digital piracy, and ensure the protection of the material shared through digital media.

Furthermore, In Electronic media together with digitally transmitted information, the Electronic Media (Programs and Advertisements) Code of Conduct 2015 has been developed to ensure that broadcast media aired does not trigger immorality among the public. However, the vague and general laws, which the media outlet often does not specify, have caused concerns or censorship and restricted freedom of speech in cyberspace. In addition, the National Cyber Security Policy 2021 aims at protecting digital assets and ensuring cyber security with special reference to safeguarding critical information Technology systems from violations. Though this enhances nation security it brings up questions such as how to balance all these national security concerns with privacy and other individual digital rights. These rules and regulations listed above measure impact in Pakistan's digital rights landscape, outlining the boundaries of such rights as freedom of speech, privacy and information in the digital frontier.

4. Main Governmental and Non-Governmental Bodies Involved in Regulating Digital Information

Some of the important government and NGO's that have mandates for controlling information in the digital age in Pakistan are as follows. Today the PTA is the major regulatory body responsible for the regulating Internet services, telecommunications facilities, and contents. It enforces PECA rules, it assesses national security standards to prevent aggressive or unlawful data to circulate. The PTA also controls tools involved in offering services by guaranteeing that service providers impose honest procedures in the online platform.

The Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MoITT) develop and enforces rules regarding Pakistan's information technology and cyber security. As its responsibilities it encompasses the sales of all the IT services, enhancing computer and internet usage throughout the region and the provision of internet throughout the country. It also implements projects with foreign organizations to advance the nation's information technology industry and establish e- Governance programs.

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), through its Cyber Crime Wing, plays a critical role in investigating and prosecuting cybercrimes. This includes dealing with hacking, online fraud, unauthorized data access, and other digital offenses. The FIA also collaborates with international enforcement agencies to tackle cross-border cyber threats, thereby ensuring Pakistan's cybersecurity and digital safety.

In addition to governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society are stepping up lobbying to protect digital rights, privacy and freedom of speech. These organizations often need to discuss with governments to create laws and help the victims of cyber-criminal activities. The Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is one such group that focuses on ensuring the people's rights to security in cyberspace.

The Data Protection Bill outlines the creation of a Data Protection Commission to regulate data protection within six months of the passage of the Bill. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) handle cybercrimes as described under PECA, and the PTA controls contents in compliance with

PECA and the Unlawful online material Rules. The FIA and PTA need assistance from service providers and social media platforms to allow access to the needed data.

4.1 Analysis of Justifications Provided by The Pakistani Government Through Official Statements

Until 2009 the country did not have a proper procedure for mobile network blackouts and various governmental departments used to demand network outages without following a proper procedure. It produced tensions with the government and inability to meet human rights responsibilities this created challenges to telecom carriers. The Ministry of Information Technology forced the PTA to introduce a

standard approach in 2009 but the carriers such as Telenor Pakistan highlighted that the formal procedure became active only in 2012. This shift entailed a shift towards more formal albeit contentious practices of network management.

In this regard, one can mention that people benefited from the available opportunities for accessing information and for communication in the frame of digital era. Nevertheless, as the thesis explores along with empowerment, the governments of the world and the Pakistan government in particular have over the recent past resorted to internet shutdowns and online censorship. These acts are often explained in the language of national security, public safety, religious concerns and, political stability. These are often accompanied by legal and regulatory justifications by the Pakistani government, which puts it under pressure by human rights organizations to limit residents' freedoms and shut down access to information. In this thesis, I evaluate the Pakistani government's announced reasons for internet blackouts and censorship, its policy documents, and legal justifications for such measures, in terms of their implications for democratic principles, safety, civil liberties, and so on.

4.1.1. National Security

The counter-terrorism efforts are the most often cited reason by the Pakistani government for ordering internet shutdowns. The first large throughput drops in mid-2024 was attributed to undersea cable repairs, which had been a recurring problem in prior years. However, that is just the beginning of the story, and as weeks went by and the delays continued, one had an impression that the issue is far more extensive. People got angrier due to unclear message that comes from the government and using "national security" as the primary reason, which created the further skepticism on the government's intentions.

The government has banned social media especially during operation in some districts of Pakistan like tribal and Baluchistan to avoid the communication and propaganda of the terror outfits. Internet shutdowns were first implemented in Pakistan in 2005 in its large military and anti- insurgency operation in Balochistan. However, such disruptions did not extend to other parts of the country until 2012, when Interior Minister Rahman Malik initiated mobile network shutdowns. Since then, these shutdowns have become a regular practice in Pakistan and persist to this day. While the frequency of these interruptions has varied, it has remained relatively steady over the past five years. Currently, this approach is supported by the PECA, specifically Section 34, which empowers the government to remove or block online content deemed a threat to national security. The wide meaning of "national security" has led to criticism, with human rights groups in general and Amnesty International in particular claiming that it permits the state to silence dissident voices under the pretense of security concerns. The means of defining what is a 'security threat' are unclear, which leads to purposive blocking, the 'democracy' could be hampered and people's access to information restricted in politically fragile areas.

4.1.2. Religious Sensitivities

Religious and cultural taboos remain crucial to the Pakistan's approach to the blocking of web content. Among the recent measures it has been banned to access Web sites and information considered insulting to the Islamic religion. A prime example is the blocking for several years in mid-2012 after a sensitive anti-Islam video release was posted on the website. During other festive seasons too, such as in the commemoration of Ashura or Eid ul-Fitar the cases occurs also. Even though there is legal basis for such censorship contained in PECA, mainly where there is blasphemy.

4.1.3. Civil Unrest

Another reason cited often for internet shutdown is to prevent public disturbance. This excuse is often invoked by governments during this and other demonstrations, assembly political and religious gatherings, expressing concerns that social media may assist in galvanizing many people and inciting unrest. For instance, during the 2017 Faizabad sit-in led by religious groups and in the current "National Gathering" spearheaded by Dr. Mahrang Baloch in Gwadar, the government shut down mobile internet to avert dissemination of incitement.

The PTA exercises its power under Section 54 of the Pakistan Telecommunications (Re- Organization) Act 1996, This facilitates the government to block the internet in cases of any break down of law and order. They also argue that internet shutdown during protests violates Constitution of Pakistan's right to assembly and free speech. Some envisage this move as a tool of dealing with opposition and controlling external criticism in contrast to maintaining public order.

4.1.4. Electoral Integrity and Public Safety

During the times of elections, the Pakistani government left no stone unturned to impose internet restrictions to prevent the spread of disinformation and ensure public safety. Concerns about misinformation influencing the political process or causing public disturbance have prompted these steps. In 2024 elections, the justification given after the one-day suspension of internet across Pakistan, "Murtaza Solangi, the information minister of Pakistan's caretaker government and the state-run telecom agency, acknowledged the disruption of internet services late Saturday but blamed it on "a technical fault." The government routinely used Section 54 of the Telecom Act to justify shutdowns. Furthermore, on February 8, 2024, the government's position on internet shutdowns remained uncertain. Interior Minister Dr. Gohar Ejaz remarked that any decision will be based on security demands from particular districts or provinces. Meanwhile, interim Balochistan Information Minister Jan Achakzai imposed temporary internet restrictions at crucial voting locations in Balochistan. However, critics are quick to point out that these procedures hardly ever allow information sharing during the election informing the voters, the competing political parties and the election monitors.

The effect of such an action to shutdowns in the political process makes one to question the credibility and integrity of the Pakistan's election to the democracy.

(Tahir & Siddiqua, n.d.). Despite the reason stated, the announcement was noticeably imprecise, failing to clarify the regions impacted by the suspension or provide any specific details regarding the length of the restrictions, leaving the public with major doubt and unanswered concerns.

4.1.5. Misinformation and Fake News

The Pakistani government almost always uses the spread of fake news or misinformation as an excuse to implement restrictions online, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, when it warned about the spread of false information that could erode faith in health interventions. According to the PECA, the government operates with broad power to remove or block any content that it considers as misinformation especially in period of disease outbreaks or disasters. While such actions may look reasonable in situations where public safety is at stake, opponents claim that the ambiguous concept of "fake news" allows for abuse. These measures, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have stated may have a detrimental effect of silencing genuine political discourse and decreasing free speech. Nadia Rahman, Amnesty International's acting deputy regional director for South Asia stated that the government's attempt to increase the scope of criminal defamation laws under the pretext of fighting "fake news", cybercrime, and

misinformation, pose a risk to journalists, human rights defenders and political opponents, in defiance of international treaties. This raises important questions concerning the range of adverse effects it may bring to the freedom of press as well as the democratic governance in Pakistan.

4.1.6. Censorship of Political Dissent

Internet censorship serves also to silence political opposition within Pakistan even despite the government's justifications in the name of maintaining public order and national security. Most social media accounts that express call for dissent or negative commentary against the government are blocked, and a majority of it happens during politically sensitive occasions including opposition demonstrations or voting periods. But the public believe that the restriction on free speech regarding military is the part of legislation to suppress freedom of speech to nab dissent as Pakistan continues with military rule disguised as democracy. (Tahir & Siddiqua, n.d.) The authorities argue that such limitations are vital to prevent the spread of false information, yet more often, they exacerbate the issue: access to a platform where information can be checked is limited.

4.1.7. Protest or Mass mobilization

In Pakistan there is often a series of protest whenever there is heightened political, social, or even economic activity. High inflation rates, political instability, and government corruptions, and suppression

of civil liberties for the groups such as the Baloch or Muslims fuel such large demonstrations. These activities may be conducted by political parties, civil society, and labor organizations where the act of use social media in mobilizing and co-coining of protests across the country. Protest can be from simple marches, boycotts, sit-ins or even riots accompanied by culmination between protesters and authorities depending with the existing issues and the degree of influence from the government. To resolve the situation, the authorities have found a way to gradually decrease the pace of protests using an internet blackout. Though, such situation evoked rather a difficult choice not only for the demonstrators, but those people who were not informed about the actions taking place nearby. Pakistan's capital Islamabad was closed down on October

8 due to the strikes called by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). (Yilmaz et al., 2022)

4.1.8 Firewall Installation: A Modern Tool for Media Censorship and Internet Slowdown

Firewall has become a complex but a more or less an unmanageable process of filtering Internet access and media regulation in Pakistan. Those technologies are employed by government officials from time to time in the pretext of national security or maintaining order, but the true effects cut across. These firewalls can prevent access to social media sites, restrict specified websites and deliberately throttle internet connection, which is detrimental to business, education and everyday interaction (Yilmaz et al., 2022) Such measures are often applied without prior notice or even any legal justification, according to the petitioners in petitions against nationwide internet bans. Firewall installations add a new dimension of Internet regulation, undermining essential freedom online. Internet speeds in Pakistan have been deteriorating in recent days and there is criticism and speculation that the government is surreptitiously setting up a new firewall like regime to control the web in the country. (Sykes, 1999).

The latter has been termed as mass surveillance which disproportionately affects anybody and everyone, which is a violation of international human rights law. It hinders the expression of people's freedom. This is considered a severe violation of our privacy. It may inhibit personal freedom and Make individuals reluctant in the sense they will not be spewing out information as they would when they are just using their mouth without supervision. Call interception technique

(like phone tapping) has been around for decades and maybe utilized legally in so far as the principles of human rights are followed strictly. These include the need that it must be required and obligatory, specific and authorized, permitted and managed by the totally independent bodies such as courts. But recent years have seen technological progress supercharge surveillance projects, and it has become possible at the same time to monitor Internet connections and phone calls of practically every Internet user in a country. (Eisenberg, 2016)

5. IMPACT OF INTERNET SHUTDOWNS AND ONLINE CENSORSHIP ON LEGAL

RIGHTS TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN PAKISTAN

Freedom of expression is one of the most fundamental human rights that is accepted globally, and that is supported by numerous regional and international instruments. According to the freedoms of speech and expression, citizens engage actively in democratic processes.

The principles of free speech and receiving, as well as sharing, information are the basic values of a democratic state. They provide people with opportunities to voice for their opinions, share knowledge and to get hold of information necessary for decision-making process. These rights, promote transparency, probity, and participation in the exercise of authority and the management of affairs so as to deny those in authority the power over the people. (Fukuyama, 2015)

This paper argues that freedom of expression is one of the pre-eminent human rights that are recognized globally and that is anchored on several regional as well as international instruments. As per the freedom of speech and expression people get actively involved in ‘democracy’, as we know. That is the general principle of free speech and the ability to receive and disseminate information as the fundamental ideals of any democratic state. They offer people chances to advocate for themselves, to disseminate information and to obtain information which is essential for decision making. These rights enhance accountability, integrity, and inclusiveness of power and control in exercise and administration of power to eliminate the domination of people by their leaders. Absence of these rights means the destruction of the democracy as the state authority tend to limit the influence of citizens on their decisions.

5.1. Freedom of Expression under Pakistani Law

The Pakistan constitution in Article 19 allows citizens of the country to express themselves and their beliefs. However, this freedom is qualified inasmuch as it may be done in the interest of national security, public order, decency and morality.

"Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam, the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of or incitement to an offence]" Pakistan's judiciary has consistently highlighted the importance of free expression as a foundation of democracy, while accepting the constitutional limits under Article 19. Courts have emphasized that any restriction must meet the elements of reasonableness, necessity, and proportionality. Judicial verdicts regularly stress balancing individual rights with larger societal goals, particularly when government policies are perceived to undermine press freedom or inhibit criticism. Still, the most important task is given to the judiciary because that is where the role of the interpreter of the law is indicated. In *Rana Muhammad Arshad v. In Pakistan* recently the Islamabad High Court has declared FIA's inquiry as

vindictive against journalist Rana Muhammad Arshad to be unconstitutional and unconstitutional to free expression, media and right to information under Constitution of Pakistan Article 19 and 19-A. (Waisbord, 2001) It directed the FIA to establish guidelines to prevent such crimes against journalists in the future.

5.2. Instances of Internet Shutdowns and Online Censorship

To know the constitution of Internet shutdown and how they become frequent in Pakistan, it is essential to analyze the 41 shutdowns that occurred between the years 2012 and 2017. (Purdon et al., 2015)

This time period OS the emergence of institutionalized shutdowns as a method of addressing security needs and controlling flow of information at the behest of people's right to free speech and to communicate. Again, that is not new in Pakistan where internet shut down and some sort of filtration is now commonly used measure during political instability, security force operation, and protest. For instance, Internet service was suspended across the country during the 2017 Faizabad Dharna protests but more critically it was unavailable in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Likewise, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan protests in 2021 shut down social media platforms in the entire nation. As mentioned earlier, long term shutdowns in Balochistan happened under the garb of anti- militant's operations. (Tabassum et al., 2024) In this case, existing policies erode the citizens' right to information and free speech, hence stifering democracy and commerce.

The TLP had put up the Faizabad evidence in November 2017 in protest against what they regarded as a change in the oath of office regarding Khatm-e-Nabuwat in the Pakistan Election Act 2017. (Zeeshan, 2024) The protesters blocked one of the major connecting points between Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Faizabad intersection for over three weeks paralyzing movement in both cities. The sit-in was followed by a challenging agreeing to some demands by the military that gave some benefits to the TLP. Security concerns on their side led the authorities to close down the internet in Islamabad and Rawalpindi during the protest. Internet and mobile data and broadband services were off for many days and greatly limited the citizens' chances to talk and get information as well as work.(Mossberger et al., 2012) The IHC chastised the government's conduct of the rally in Faizabad, underlining citizens' constitutional rights to free expression and access to information under Articles 19 and 19A.(Singh, 2025) The Supreme Court emphasized that the state's unwillingness to act against demonstrators harmed public order and fundamental rights, such as free expression. When imposing boundaries, the judge stressed the concept of proportionality. (Barak, 2010)

Besides, information dissemination on the protest was well regulated, where several news stations were closed down. In the 2018 general elections of Pakistan, there was media restriction and most of this were geared towards political parties that had called for volunteered the military and government. TV channels were for some time off air or ordered to avoid broadcasting some political personnel or parties that include

the Pakistan People's Party and the PML (N). One was during the election campaign when TV broadcasting did not air more events such as rallies or speeches by opposition leaders. (Wring & Ward, 2010) The government control over the various media instruments raised concern over the credibility of the election as political watchdogs and human rights bodies criticized the state for attempting to influence public opinion. Also, prior to the 2024 elections media control and Intentional shut down have been feared to occur. The more political contexts evolve, especially through political opposition activities and political demonstrations, the more concerns are raised of similar tactics being adopted again to frustrate free-flow of information. Actually, the Pakistani government on record has been said to have employed such methods in moments of unrest, especially more so following rallies and security mishaps.(Kronstadt & Kumar, 2014) For example, during the May 2024 protests, mobile networks in important cities were turned off to prevent communication and the dissemination of protest-related information.(Khamzina et al., 2025) The constraints have elicited concerns on Check/'measures' the 'threat' that the Apex Court of the land poses to some of the established milestones such as freedom of speech and information.

In 2019, Pakistan blocked the country's access to the important social media sites including Facebook, twitter and YouTube for the entire country. This decision was made over the aggressive and unlawful actions of the population of Pakistan and other countries, expressed on social networks and calling for overthrowing the government and the military fully armed and with weapon under the shares after growing the conflict with India during the attack in Pulwama district in February 2019. (Saeed et al., 2025)

The government gave its reasons for shutdowns in order to adhere to national security by counter arguing that such actions were to avoid spread of hazardous material that inflames the war. But opposition labelled these measures as attempts to curb dissent and free speech which in effect curtails Pakistan Constitutional right to freedom of speech. That said some regarded these restrictions as an attempt to stifle dissenting opinions and manage the information dissemination at a time when it was presumably most needed.

On July 28, 2024, a wide range of mobile numbers and the internet were deactivated in the Makran division of Balochistan, and remained closed for 12 days and severely impacting overall communication in the province. (Bhatti et al., 2026). This closure took place at the National gathering conducted by Dr. Mahrang Baloch in Gwadar. More specifically, the assembly advocated for more self-rule for the Baloch people of the region, something the state met with significant disdain; its officials even cut off internet and mobile phone signals to ensure that news of the assembly did not get out. Besides, this internet shutdown occurred at the backdrop of the Pakistan Army's Operation Azm- e-Istehkhan aimed at taming rising insurgency in Balochistan. The Chief Minister of Balochistan endorsed the operation intending on dismantling terrorists and, eliminating threats across several areas of the province, (Ugwu, 2026) They

must be considering those affected by the gatherings. In fact, Operation Azm was considered as being carried out in armed confrontation of the region's insurgency particularly after a series of terrorist incidents related to separatist groups. During this operation, the Internet was blocked because it might contain sensitive information that can provoke public unrest, and it diminishes the ability of rebels' organizations to rally supporters.

5.3. Impacts of Internet Shutdowns and Media Censorship

Restrictions to internet and media freedom affect free speech and information, business and individuals, and even health. They enslave the citizens limiting their rights to free speech, have a chilling effect that journalists, activists, and everyone else have to tread carefully and avoid free speech for consequences, and limit the people's access to information the government deems dangerous. (Day, 1999) Businesses and startups, especially those that depend on digital platforms, incur operational losses, while global trade and communication are disrupted. During a crisis, public services like banking, healthcare, and education are disrupted, limiting people access to vital resources and emergency information. (Hassankhani et al., 2021)

5.4. Impact on Freedom of Expression

Social media restrictions and media censorship in Pakistan prevent the residents of the country from freely voicing themselves especially during a crisis. These activities prevent the sharing of crosscutting ideas and crucial information; hence limiting public discourse and democracy. In *Malik Ahsan v. Federal Ministry of Pakistan* (2018), the high court of Lahore in *Federation of Pakistan versus Government of Pakistan* announced that such limitations are in derogation of Article 19 of the constitution which provides for freedom of speech. It is stressed that any restriction of freedom of expression must be justified and reasonable and proportional. (Gunatilleke, 2021)

This manner, individuals who choose to voice their opinions face the risks of experiencing the repercussions therefore majority of the Pakistan population exercise self-censorship especially when it comes to issues regarding the government or other important organizations. Numerous individuals and collectives do not want to make their opinions more broadly known because they worry about a legal prosecution, a social backlash, or even an actual violence. This chilling effect prevents free and critical speak and discourages the democratic process, and shrinks conversation. Consequently, the reduction of free speech undermines democracy's activity in Pakistan at large. (Arain et al., 2024)

5.5. Impact on Access to Information

The government has been closing the internet and applying media censorship in Pakistan, especially in those periods that have witnessed political instabilities and manifested through demonstrations. Such strategies discussed above ensure that the people do not get timely and credible news about some of these

events hence limiting their knowledge on such important events. Shutdowns can happen at any given time and this puts the public in a dilemma over affairs which are very fundamental in the society such as security integrity issues, health concerns and government policies. As internet connection becomes essential for millions of students, especially those from rural areas, the disruptions have led to an education calamity. Lectures, discussions and submissions of assignments: a large portion of students' skip lectures, contribute in class discussions and fail to meet project deadlines many students hindering their way to the next level vast majority. (Hew & Cheung, 2014)

Telecommunications disruptions especially during politically sensitive events have a significant impact to information flow in Pakistan. At such a time, the government often censors popular social media applications and news sites or entirely shuts down the internet connection and often all that is left is limited chances of the people to share relevant information. This can lead to confusion, failure in communication and absence of accountability. For instance, in a case of Rana Muhammad Arshad v. Pakistan case revealed that communication restrictions which Citizens right to be informed require may be utilized to suppress free speech within the country and control what data people get to access. While these interruptions are detrimental to personal freedom, they also undermine people's trust in government and media outlets. (Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012)

5.6. Impact on Business and Entrepreneurs

Loss of connection on the Internet is a problem in Pakistan which affects continuity in various businesses mainly because the communication must be consistent. Such social problems pose a big challenge in e-commerce platforms because their operation depends on a strong internet connection especially in areas of undertaking transactions, dealing with customers as well as processing orders. The concern is increasingly expected in freelancers, small company owners, and e-commerce personnel who apply WhatsApp to contact clientele, suggestion work progression, and complete dealings. To the majority of these workers, failing to deliver multimedia communications or even plain text messages on time may lead to late work, failure to meet deadlines and therefore incurring losses. (Rennecker & Godwin, 2005) As much as the research done by Pakistan Institute of Development Economics suggested, a 24- hours internet ban might cost government up to Rs 1.3 billion. The freelancing working sector they say they lose 390 million Rupees per day if the business. Internet restrictions have a severe impact on organizations and business men especially those who operate online. ITIF's Vice President

Daniel Castro also warned Pakistan about increasing internet bans.(McLaughlin & Castro, 2019) He warns that such initiatives, although offering short-term political rewards, may cause significant long-term economic disruption. The constraints harm small businesses, entrepreneurs, and the growing freelance economy, potentially discouraging foreign investment and innovation. The Pakistan Software Houses

Association (PSHA) estimates that interruptions might cost the digital and IT sectors over \$300 million. Internet interferences may cause frequent instabilities in worldwide business communication that may hinder international collaboration and business. The Institute for Human Rights and Business publishes "Digital Pakistan: This paper focuses on the research question: What is the Economic Cost of Internet Shutdowns? The examples of frequent interruptions and their impact on businesses especially those carrying out online business and business that deal with the exportation business and other international businesses helps this article to determine the huge amount of money lost as a result of shutdowns. It stresses the urgent importance of the stable internet connection to make economic development higher and to attract investors to other countries. (Indjikian & Siegel, 2005)

5.7. Impact on the General Public

Ons interfering with the internet in Pakistan, other essential services that are affected include, banking, health and education among others. Accessibility is eliminated by downs and disruptions in online banking services thereby protracting financial transactions and preventing the customers and companies from being able to make e-payments. Telemedicine platforms, and other healthcare programs, have been targeted as people are unable to consult with doctors or access their information. Students struggle to attend online classes, access online information on learning resources and virtual classrooms thus widening the gap of learning mostly in the rural areas. (Olanrewaju et al., 2021)

The ordinary users lose a lot when they cannot get the news and emergency alerts whenever the internet is down. People fail to attend official notices like advices relating to safety, a medical emergency, or a new regulation by the government hence misunderstanding. Unfortunately, this is something lacks especially during the calamities, demonstrations, and epidemics because getting timely information and reality can define between lifesaving and a disastrous situation. These disruptions produce societal decay diminish faith in the government and other institutions. Individuals are unable to seek emergency services including, health related services, contacting friends or relatives in case of an emergency, and receiving vital information – news about the incident. Likewise, the internet can be closed down a measure that is often used by the government to neutralize opposition. (Sanovich et al., 2018)

In Pakistan, state-imposed internet shutdowns and media restrictions, which are generally justified as national security concerns, frequently violate the right to free expression and access to information. These measures undermine democratic norms by silencing public discussion and limiting access to crucial information. High-profile occurrences, including the 2017 Faizabad demonstrations, the 2018 general elections, and the 2024 Balochistan internet outage, highlight a pattern of government overreach that restricts people's fundamental rights. While the judiciary has underlined the importance of free expression, there is still a contradiction between preserving national security and upholding individual

liberty. These shutdowns have far-reaching economic and social consequences, including interruptions in businesses, education, and communications. Moving forward, a more balanced policy is needed to protect both national security and individuals' digital rights while retaining transparency, accountability, and free exchange of ideas.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, self-censorship and restrictions placed upon media and internet that are essentially justified in the name of national security actually infringe freedom of speech, access to information etc. All these measures erode democratic standards since they suppress public debates and control distribution of valuable information. They listed some of the high-profile events such as the Faizabad sit-in in 2017, general elections in 2018 and Balochistan Internet shutdown in 2024 with a centralized government attempt to curb the basic rights of the people.

Though, the usefulness of free expression has been stressed by the judiciary, there is an ongoing paradox in the long-standing conflict between the protection of individual liberty and the state security. These shutdowns are not only privation of some economic and social interactions but also affect business, education, and communication channels. As for the future, there must be a policy that is equally aimed equally at preserving national security and citizens' right to privacy in the context of digital rights but will remain open and developed with honesty and adherence to democracy values.

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