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Pakistan: Repeal Amendment to Draconian Cyber Law

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New Law Threatens Free Expression, Internet Freedoms

(New York) – The [Pakistan](#) government’s recent amendment to the country’s cybercrimes act seriously threatens internet freedom and free expression, Human Rights Watch said today. Pakistan’s parliament should immediately repeal or reform the [Pakistan Electronic Crimes \(Amendment\) Act, 2025](#).

The new law, [enacted](#) on January 29, 2025, includes [provisions](#) making the dissemination of “fake or false” information a criminal offense punishable by up to three years in prison. The amendment does not define “fake or false” news but uses [vague and overbroad language](#) to describe it subjectively as information that could cause “fear, panic, disorder or unrest.” By excluding civil society groups and the private sector from consultation on the bill, the government prevented genuine public scrutiny of the new law, which is vague and overbroad in violation of basic rights.

“Pakistan’s amended Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act neither protects the public from legitimate online security threats nor respects fundamental human rights,” said [Patricia Gossman](#), associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The government should uphold the right to free expression and overhaul the new law by removing its abusive provisions.”

The [amendments to the Electronic Crimes Act](#) would create four new government bodies to regulate online content and would broaden the definition of online harm. The government bodies are authorized to block and remove content based on ambiguous criteria that do not meet the standards of proportionality and necessity required under international human rights law.

One of the bodies, the Social Media Protection Tribunal, comprises government-appointed members rather than independent members of the judiciary.

Another new body, the Social Media Protection and Regulation Authority, are authorized to order any social media company to remove or block content deemed to be “against the ideology of Pakistan,” be known to be “fake or false,” or to cast aspersions on various public officials. The authority could also require any social media company to register with it and impose any conditions it deems “appropriate” upon registration.

Parliament adopted the amendment in the context of [an escalating crackdown](#) on digital speech in Pakistan including frequently shutting down the internet or throttling internet networks. Pakistani authorities have denied or limited access to the internet as a default policing tactic to shut down protests and prevent criticism of the government under the guise of maintaining law and order and curbing misinformation.

The nongovernmental [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#) has expressed concern that the new law is “likely to become yet another means of targeting political workers, human rights defenders, journalists and dissidents by effectively penalizing criticism of state institutions.” The [Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists](#) announced nationwide protests against the amendment, calling it an infringement on people’s rights.

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Pakistan is a party, limits restrictions on the right to freedom of expression. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, the independent expert body that monitors state compliance with the ICCPR, has stated

that any restrictions should be provided by law, narrowly defined, and be necessary and proportionate to achieve one or more legitimate objectives under the covenant.

The Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, (PECA) 2016, has already been used to violate rights. Dozens of journalists have [been charged](#) under its provisions. In April 2019, Shahzeb Jillani, a prominent Pakistani journalist, was [charged](#) with “cyber terrorism,” for criticizing government institutions. In September 2020, Asad Toor, Bilal Farooqi, and Absar Alam, also journalists, were [charged](#) with sedition and offenses under PECA for publishing allegedly “objectionable” and “derogatory” material online.

“The new Electronic Crimes Act will further entrench violations of free expression and internet freedoms in Pakistan,” Gossman said. “Digital policing of citizens will not protect them from ‘fake news,’ but will give the authorities a weapon to punish people whose speech they don’t like.”

Associated documents