Muslim concerns trigger Pakistani Web bans

May 20 2010, By CHRIS BRUMMITT , Associated Press Writer

Pakistani women participate in a rally against a Facebook page, in Islamabad, Pakistan, Thursday, May 20, 2010. Pakistan government ordered Internet service providers to block the social networking site amid anger over a page that encourages users to post images of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. (AP Photo/B.K.Bangash)

(AP) -- Pakistan blocked YouTube and many other Internet sites Thursday in a widening crackdown on online content deemed offensive to Islam, reflecting the secular government's sensitivities to an issue that has ignited protests in the Muslim country.

The move came a day after the government obeyed a court order to block Facebook over a page called "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!" that encourages users to post images of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. Most Muslims regard depictions of the prophet, even favorable ones, as blasphemous.

Supporters of an Islamist political party protested against Facebook in at least three cities in small and peaceful rallies. The government, which is unpopular among many Islamists for siding with the United States in the war against the Taliban and al-Qaida, is hoping that the website bans will lessen anger in the days ahead.

"We are ready to die protecting the honor of our beloved Prophet Muhammad," said Aysha Hameed, one of 1,000 female protesters in Multan city.

Others - mostly members of the more secular, educated elite - accused the government of blocking freedom of expression and hurting small businesses that use Facebook for marketing. Many questioned need for the entire Facebook and YouTube sites to be blocked, instead of individual pages on them.

About 20 million of Pakistan's 180 million people are Internet users and social networking sites are among the most popular, especially among those younger than 25. Pakistan's Internet service providers' association said usage had dropped by about 25 percent since Wednesday.

The offending Facebook page encourages users to post images of the prophet on May 20 to protest threats made by a radical Muslim group against the creators of the American TV series "South Park" for depicting Muhammad in a bear suit during an episode earlier this year.

"Such malicious and insulting attacks hurt the sentiments of Muslims around the world and cannot be accepted under the garb of freedom of expression," Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Basit said.

Pakistan and other Muslim nations saw large and sometimes violent protests in 2006 when a Danish newspaper published cartoons of Muhammad, and again in 2008 when they were reprinted. Later the

same year, a suspected al-Qaida suicide bomber attacked the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, killing six people.

The telecommunications authority did not say what material on YouTube prompted it to block the site and more than 450 other unidentified pages, only citing "growing sacrilegious contents." Wahajus Siraj, the head of the Internet service providers' association, said the ban was because images of the Prophet Muhammad were also cropping up on the video-sharing site.

Blackberry service was halted for around 10 hours as efforts were made to stop mobile access to Facebook.

The government acted against Facebook and YouTube after it failed to persuade the websites to remove the offensive material, the telecommunications authority said. It said representatives from the two websites were welcome to contact the Pakistani government to resolve the dispute.

Facebook said the page was not a violation of its terms, but suggested it may be prepared to take it down.

"In cases like this, the approach is sometimes to restrict certain content from being shown in specific countries," it said in a statement.

Pakistan is governed by a secular political party that has little time for Islamic issues. But arguing against the court order would leave it open to accusations by its political opponents of siding with those blaspheming the prophet.

"The Islamist parties have been on the back foot for a while, this is a nice little issue for them to campaign about," said Cyril Almeida, a liberal media columnist. "There is no way you can have a rational debate

in Pakistan about freedom of speech when one side is talking about blasphemy."

The five customers in the Dandy Net Cafe in Islamabad late Thursday afternoon agreed with the ban.

"We are very happy our government and our court has taken these actions," said Mohammad Aamir Chohan, a 28-year-old engineer. "I know blocking these sites is not a solution to the problem, but we have sent a message to the world not to hurt the feelings of Muslims."

Feelings were just as intense among those opposed to the ban.

"Sad and embarrassing day in the history of Pakistan," one user posted on the microblogging site Twitter.

Reba Shahid, the editor of Spider, a monthly print magazine about the Internet, said the government "might as well take away cell phones and shut off electricity, do the whole thing."

"You're stemming the flow of information, you're stemming my growth as an intellectual, you're stemming my access to the rest of the world. I might as well go home and sleep," she said.

Pakistan blocked access to YouTube for two days in 2008 because of what it said was unIslamic content. Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia and Morocco have all blocked access to YouTube in the past for various reasons, while China routinely bans Facebook and YouTube.

It remains to be seen how successful the government will be at keeping Internet users away from the blocked sites. Citizens often have little trouble working around a ban by using proxy servers and other means.

"What's common to Facebook and Lashkar-e-Taiba?" one user on Twitter wrote, referring to a Pakistani militant group that is banned but has an alleged front group that operates openly. "They are both banned in Pakistan, but Pakistanis can still find them if they want to."

©2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Muslim concerns trigger Pakistani Web bans (2010, May 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2010-05-muslim-trigger-pakistani-web.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.