Wanted: Censor for Pakistan's Internet

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In this photo taken Wednesday, March 7, 2012, people use the Internet at a local cafe in Islamabad, Pakistan. Pakistan wants to install an Internet filtering system capable of blocking 50 million Web pages - and doesn't mind advertising the fact. The plan is alarming free speech activists who fear current censorship could become much more widespread. (AP Photo/B.K. Bangash)

(AP) -- Pakistan is advertising for companies to install an Internet filtering system that could block up to 50 million Web addresses, alarming free speech activists who fear current censorship could become much more widespread.

Internet access for Pakistan's some 20 million Web users is less restricted than in many countries in Asia and the Arab world, though some pornographic sites and those seen as insulting to Islam are blocked. Others related to separatist activities or army criticism have also been, or continue to be, censored.

Few nations have so publicly revealed their plans to censor the Web as Pakistan is doing, however. Last month, the [government](#) took out newspaper and Web advertisements asking for companies or institutions to develop the national filtering and blocking system.

"They are already blocking a lot of [Internet content](#), and now they are going for a massive system that can only limit and control [political discourse](#)," said Shahzad Ahmad, the director of Bytes for All Pakistan, which campaigns for [Internet freedom](#). "The government has nothing to do with what I choose to look at."

The government doesn't currently list the sites it has blocked, or their number, or say who sits on the committee that decides what pages to shut down. Pakistan's Telecommunication Authority instructs the country's 50 Internet Service Providers to block sites. The ISPs, which receive their license from the PTA, are obliged to obey.

In November, the PTA ordered cell phone companies to block text messages containing a list of more than 1,500 English words it said were offensive. But the plan was dropped after public ridicule and complaints from cell phone companies about practicality.

The plan to censor the Internet comes amid unease over a set of proposals by a media regulatory body aimed at bringing the country's freewheeling television media under closer [government control](#). With general elections later this year or earlier next, some critics have speculated the government might be trying to cut down on criticism.

The media proposals call for television stations not to broadcast programs "against the national interest" or those that "undermine its integrity or solidarity as an independent and sovereign country" or "contain aspersions against or ridicule the organs of the State."

Pakistan's Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan denied Wednesday that the government was seeking to curb the media.

"We want to see the media growing. We want to strengthen it," Awan said, emphasizing that the proposals were just that, and the government wouldn't implement them without the media's consent.

The government advertisements state it wants a system capable of shutting down up to 50 million Web addresses in multiple languages with a processing delay of not less than one millisecond.

The head of Pakistan's ISP association, Wahajus Siraj, said he supported the proposed system, saying his ISP and others in the association didn't have the time or money to take down the sites. He also said rights activists had nothing to worry about.

"They don't fully understanding the concept of it," said Siraj. "This is not new censorship. It's making the manual system more efficient. I respect their point of view, but decent freedom of speech should not be blocked."

Siraj, who sits on the board of the government-run technology fund seeking proposals for the blocking system, said there had been many expressions of interest to create the system, including from two Western firms. He declined to name them.

Websense Inc., a San Diego-based Internet security firm, has already said it is not bidding for the Pakistan project.

"We call on other technology providers to also do the right thing for the citizens of Pakistan and refuse to submit a proposal for this contract," it said in a statement. "Broad government censorship of citizen access to the Internet is morally wrong."

U.S. technology companies have been criticized for helping foreign governments censor the Internet to their citizens. Cisco Systems Inc., which makes networking equipment that could be used in official efforts to monitor and control Internet use, is often cited; the company insists it does not provide any government with any special capabilities and cannot control what its customers do with the products.

Like in many Asian countries where pornographic materials are banned, Pakistan currently tries to block adult websites. It also seeks to censor what it sees as "blasphemous" content toward Islam, as other Muslim nations do.

In 2008, the government blocked YouTube because of anti-Islamic movies on the site; in 2010, it blocked Facebook for two weeks amid anger over a page that encouraged users to post images of Islam's Prophet Muhammad.

Other sites that have, or continue to be blocked, are those containing news and views from Baluchistan, a southwestern province where a separatist insurgency has simmered for years in the face of army crackdowns. There have been other cases where sites have been blocked apparently after they triggered the anger of members of the military and political elite. Rollingstone.com has been offline since July last year, reportedly because it ran a short story critical of the amount of budgetary funds allocated to the army. Rollingstone.com didn't return e-mails seeking comment.

Asked for comment, the telecommunication authority sent a statement that explained the blocking system was being installed because the Pakistani people wanted a "ban on blasphemous and objectionable contents that were being used to harass, deface and blackmail the innocent citizens of Pakistan."

Blocking pornographic websites and those seen insulting to Islam is not unpopular in Pakistan; many would say it is obligatory under Islam. Many of the most high-profile blocks have been a result of court orders acting on petitions from members of the public.

"I'm with the government on this one. They have right the intention," said Ahmjad Alvi, founder of Brainnet, one of the country's first ISPs. "Think of the kids."

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