

Pakistan threatens to block social media over 'blasphemy'

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Religious students and activists gather for a protest against social media in Islamabad on March 8, 2017, demanding the removal of all blasphemous content from social media sites in the country

A Pakistani court has ordered the government to open an investigation into online "blasphemy", threatening to ban social media networks if they failed to censor content deemed insulting to Islam, lawyers said Thursday.

The issue came to the fore in January when five secular activists known for their outspoken views against religious extremism and the powerful military were disappeared, presumed abducted by state agencies according to opposition parties and international rights groups.

Four of them were later returned to their families weeks later, but not before they were tarnished by a virulent campaign to paint them enemies of Islam deserving execution.

Judge Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui of the Islamabad High Court asked the government to form an investigative committee to report back next Monday over the issue, saying he could order [social media](#) sites to be blocked if offending content remained online.

"The judge ordered the government to make a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) with Muslim officials only to look into the blasphemy issue," said advocate Tariq Asad, who represents the hardline Red Mosque which brought the case to court.

Rights groups say the label of blasphemer is liberally applied by religious conservatives in order to silence criticism of extremism.

Even unproven allegations can be fatal. At least 65 people including lawyers, judges and activists have been murdered by vigilantes over blasphemy allegations since 1990, according to recent think tank report.

Pakistan previously banned Facebook for hosting allegedly blasphemous content for two weeks in 2010 while YouTube was unavailable from 2012 to 2016 over an amateur film about the Prophet Muhammad that led to global riots.

But Islamabad later came to agreements with major internet firms to block within Pakistan material that violated its laws, generally once the

companies had performed their own cross-checks.

Yasser Latif Hamdani, a lawyer who worked to get YouTube unblocked, said previous web censorship had also originated with [court](#) orders and the judge could succeed in implementing a fresh set of bans.

"In this case you would have to apply to the Supreme Court to overrule it. Would they? He's going to couch it in religious language...It could create a lot of problems if he does that," he said.

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