Social Media Might Ban the Pakistani Map at India's Behest

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An alarming piece of legislation is about to enter into force in India next month mandating that social media platforms such as Facebook remove "unlawful content" such as posts that affect the "sovereignty and integrity of India", meaning that this law could easily be abused by New Delhi to demand that the internationally recognized Pakistani map be banned because it contradicts India's maximalist claims to Kashmir.

The Information-Communication Technology (ICT) Revolution of the past few decades has resulted in social media becoming a regular part of most people's daily lives, with billions of people checking their accounts daily (sometimes across several platforms) and coming into contact with an unquantifiable amount of information from countless sources. One of the unintended consequences of this development is that social media has been exploited by various forces in order to further agendas that might be illegal in certain countries, such as spreading terrorist propaganda or fake news hoaxes. It therefore makes sense that states would want to legislate the activities that occur on these transnational foreign-based platforms in lieu of restricting their citizens' access to the sites on which so much of their social lives have become dependent.

Banning The Map

There's nothing wrong with that in principle so long as internationally agreed-upon norms are used as the basis by which governments decree that Facebook and other social media platforms should censor certain content, but the controversy arises when countries demand that these companies enforce legislation that infringes on the freedom of speech of other people elsewhere. India, the self-proclaimed "world's largest democracy", is [about to implement](#) a law next month mandating that "unlawful" content be scrubbed from social media, which as Reuters reports also includes materials that affect the "sovereignty and integrity" of the country. While this might be a seemingly legitimate concern for any country, it can actually be abused by India to pressure Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and others to ban the internationally recognized Pakistani map.

The reasoning behind this fear is that India's maximalist claims to Kashmir have led to New Delhi refusing to recognize that the Pakistani region of Gilgit-Baltistan is under Islamabad's writ, ergo why [India's official map](#) includes this territory as part of that country and not its neighbor's despite New Delhi exercising no sway whatsoever over it or its people. India, however, is on track to become [the world's most populous country](#) sometime in the next decade and is accordingly one of the most sought-after markets for any social media company, which is why they might bend to New Delhi's will and consider removing content from their platforms that the country deems to be "illegal", such as the internationally recognized map of Pakistan.

The Catch-22

Nevertheless, most of the world's social media giants are based in the US, so this implies that Americans (including those of Pakistani descent who share the internationally recognized map of their homeland) would have the responsible expression of their freedom of speech curtailed on behalf of a foreign government for politically subjective reasons that differ from their own government's official position on this issue, a scenario that's bound to send shockwaves through the country and become a political controversy sooner than later. The larger question being raised is the extent to which national governments can compel foreign internet companies to censor content shared by users outside of the state in question for reasons that don't objectively constitute "national security" concerns.

Furthermore, it can't be overlooked that very populous states such as India (which are prized by these companies for their enormous market potential) have a disproportionate advantage in this sense than their smaller- and medium-sized counterparts because they could restrict their citizens from accessing these platforms in response to those companies refusing to abide by their national legislation mandating the censorship of certain content such as the internationally recognized Pakistani map in the event that those laws are abused for political purposes. Pure financial motivations might therefore lead to social media companies "compromising" on their "values" but inadvertently violating the

legislation of the country in which they're based, thus creating a classic Catch-22 situation.

Brainstorming A Solution

It's difficult to figure out what the perfect solution could be to this dilemma because it's unrealistic for social media companies to censor materials based on the country of origin and not through any universal standards because Indian users could just go to Pakistani pages in order to view the "banned content", though declining to comply with New Delhi's demands could lead to serious financial consequences for the company. For all intents and purposes, Facebook and other companies' responses to the possible abuse of India's forthcoming legislation will therefore set a precedent when it comes to other governments' partnerships with these platforms for notional "security" reasons because this very concept itself could be subjectively interpreted to infringe on the legitimate rights of users abroad to responsibly express themselves.

Instead of passively reacting to the possible censorship of their internationally recognized map from social media because of Indian pressure, it might be prudent for Pakistanis to begin raising the issue of freedom of speech on these platforms in as many high-level public fora as possible, potentially even going as far as doing so in an official capacity. Facebook and other companies should make formal statements about whether they'd remove the Pakistani map from their sites if India deemed it an "illegal" violation of its "sovereignty and integrity" following the imposition of its national legislation next month which could be abused for this purpose. In addition, it should be asked whether they'd do the same when it comes to images representing the Kashmiri cause.

Concluding Thoughts

By becoming the unexpected champion of responsibly expressed free speech on social media, Pakistan and its people would also be showing the world just how vibrant their democracy really is. It would powerfully contradict the Western world's weaponized misperception of their country as a "third-world religious dictatorship" and prove that it's actually a freely developing society in which tens of millions of people are actively engaged in social media and concerned about transnational internet companies censoring their national map and images coming from the Indian side of the UN-recognized Kashmir Conflict. There's no doubt that states have the right to ask Facebook and others to remove universally acknowledged terrorist content, but they shouldn't abuse this to censor "politically inconvenient" content like India might be poised to do.

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