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Digital Rights in Pakistan: A Review of 2023

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This mid-year review of the digital rights space in 2023 seeks to study state-sanctioned, gender-based violations as well as the impact on the digital economy due to frequent internet shutdowns. This policy review aims to classify nationwide internet restrictions and developments under different categories and track the specific incidents that took place over the course of the first 6 months that violated, and in rare cases upheld, the rights of individuals in the digital realm.

State Sanctioned Developments	Gender-related Developments	Digital Economy Developments
<p>A PTI supporter was sentenced to three years imprisonment for allegedly “launching a smear campaign against the armed forces on social media.” Source: Dawn</p>	<p>A man murdered his 18-year-old daughter in Vano Ghari village of Sardaryab after a video of her dancing went viral on social media. Source: Dawn</p>	<p>Earlier in the year, in January 2023, the country faced nearly a day-long electricity shutdown which impacted internet and telecommunications services. Source: Reuters</p>
<p>In February 2023, Wikipedia was blocked in Pakistan for hosting "blasphemous content". The move was announced after Wikipedia was given a 48-hour deadline to remove some material. PTA said Wikipedia failed to comply with its ultimatum; however, later the ban was lifted after intervention from the PM who formed a parliamentary committee on the matter. Source: BBC</p>	<p>A man was found guilty by an antiterrorism court and sentenced a man to life imprisonment for the suicide of Sindh University student Naila Rind in 2017. The man was found guilty of blackmailing the young girl, which led her to take her life. Source: Dawn</p>	<p>In a positive development for digital privacy, the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) introduced a data protection service for citizens. Source: Geo News Read about the service in DRF’s blog here.</p>

<p>Digital Journalist Abid Mir was forcibly disappeared from Islamabad for several days before returning home. Source: Express Tribune</p>	<p>In March 2023, ICC introduced anti-trolling measures to protect female cricketers, who have been subjected to sexism, misogyny or threats of gender-based violence online. Pakistan’s Aliya Riaz said: “Online abuse and trolling is amplifying day-by-day and there is an urgent need to deal with it.” Source: ICC Website</p>	<p>In May 2023, according to reports in the Pakistani media, the telecommunication sector suffered losses of USD \$2.85 million due to a nationwide shutdown, while the government lost nearly \$1 million in tax revenue. Source: Al Jazeera</p>
<p>In March 2023, the movie “Javed Iqbal” was not approved to be released because it showed extensive violence and apparently glorified the serial killer. The filmmakers resubmitted the movie with significant edits and cuts to be approved. Source: Express Tribune</p>	<p>In April 2023, a case was registered against a woman who allegedly shared a post online. A mob gathered around her house and vandalized the house and the cars she owned. Source: Express Tribune</p>	<p>In May 2023, according to Ibrahim Amin, Chairman of the Pakistan Freelancers Association, the IT freelance industry was making a loss of almost \$2 million a day due to the suspension of Internet services. Source: Express Tribune</p>
<p>In March 2023, Pakistan’s media regulator banned television channels from broadcasting speeches and news conferences by Imran Khan, accusing the former prime minister of attacking the state’s institutions and promoting hatred. Source: Al Jazeera</p>	<p>In June 2023, actress Naimal Khawar became the target of online trolls after people noticed a change in her facial features and alleged that she had undergone surgery. Source: Daily Pakistan</p>	<p>The internet shutdown on 9 May 2023 affected around 160,000 Bykea, InDrive, Careem, Uber captains, drivers and riders, around 12,000 foodpanda home chefs, and restaurants, roughly 500,000 freelancers, almost 90,000 POS vendors, some 42,483,573 mobile wallets and 6,000 e-commerce stores. Source: Pro Pakistani</p>

<p>In March 2023, the Interior Ministry decided to constitute a task force to monitor the social media campaign against Pakistan Army after it observed that eight Tiktok accounts, 44 Twitter accounts, and more than 50 Facebook accounts were used to spew propaganda against the army. Source: Business Recorder</p>	<p>In June 2023, Pakistan's famous TikToker Sundal Khattak was accused of leaking Hareem Shah's private video online Source: Gulf Today</p>	<p>In June 2023, the Bykea app was hacked allegedly by Indian hackers with users receiving inappropriate messages. Source: Nation</p>
<p>In March 2023, the Section 124-A of PPC that stops criticism of the government & other state institutions was declared unconstitutional by Lahore High Court's Justice Shahid Karim Source: Express Tribune</p>	<p>According to DRF's Cyber Harassment Helpline Annual Report 2022, 2695 cases of online harassment were reported to the Helpline and it received a total of 75 complaints from journalists and media practitioners with 34 female, 40 male and 1 trans journalist. Source: 2022 Helpline report and policy brief</p>	<p>In June 2023, Pakistan witnessed a surge in online investment applications and loan apps that promise financial prosperity and easy access to funds. These platforms, initially appearing as beacons of hope, ensnared both the poor and the wealthy, ultimately leaving thousands of victims devastated and billions of rupees lost. Source: The Tribune</p>
<p>A man was sentenced to death and imprisonment on the charges of committing religion-related offences. Source: Dawn</p>	<p>In July 2023, a digital news platform, Lok Sujag, introduced a podcast online: Hum Gunaghar auratein, to highlight the stories of several women who experienced oppression in different forms. Source: Lok Sujag</p>	<p>In May 2023, The Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication drafted the "National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy," aimed at embracing AI by appreciating human intelligence and stimulating a hybrid intelligence ecosystem for equitable, responsible, and transparent use of AI. However, experts remain critical about the effectiveness and depth of the Policy. Source: Business Recorder</p>
<p>In April 2023, an audio call, allegedly between the mother-</p>		

<p>in-law of Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Umar Ata Bandial and the wife of a PTI lawyer was leaked. Source: Geo</p>		
<p>In April 2023, Imran Khan’s social media focal person, Azhar Mashwani, went “missing” for several days. Mashwani was picked up by the police. The charges leveled at him apparently included criticism of the Punjab police and the caretaker government for targeting PTI workers. He returned home after 8 days. Source: Express Tribune This detention/disappearance was a pattern of crackdowns on several other members of PTI’s social media wing, including Instagram lead Atta ur Rehman, Mohammad Salman, Arshad Siddiqui, Mudassir Rehman, and Fahad Jamal Siddiqui. Source: ARY; The Nation; The News.</p>		
<p>In May 2023, there were internet disruptions amid the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan that lasted for several days. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were blocked as well Source: NetBlocks; Business Recorder</p>		

<p>In May 2023 an alleged audio leak featuring Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan and US Congresswoman Maxine Waters was leaked in May. Source: <u>Daily Pakistan</u></p>		
<p>YouTuber and journalist Imran Riaz Khan was forcibly disappeared after being arrested on 11 May 2023. His whereabouts since then are unknown and law enforcement agencies have disavowed any knowledge of his detention and current location. Source: <u>Amnesty International</u></p>		
<p>In June 2023, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) announced that it will launch a crackdown against the over-the-top (OTT) platforms, such as Netflix, soon Source: <u>Dawn News</u></p>		