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DIGITAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION PUBLIC COMMENT ON OVERSIGHT BOARD CASE 2023-038-FB-MR (PAKISTANI PARLIAMENT SPEECH)

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In May 2023, a video was posted on Facebook by a news channel where a Pakistani politician was addressing the parliament and made comments that suggested that some public officials, including military personnel, needed to be hanged in order for the country to 'heal itself.' This was achieved by drawing parallels between the contemporary Pakistani political landscape and the perceived necessity for these executions with an ancient Egyptian ritual where individuals were sacrificed in the River Nile as a means of controlling flooding. Considering this, Meta should have taken down the video from Facebook in accordance with its [Violence and Incitement Policy](#). The policy clearly stipulates that any content containing statements targeting individuals, other than private and high-risk persons with statements that advocated or called for violence, as well as statements containing aspirational or conditional calls to violence will be removed.

The statements made by the politician in the video were clearly inflammatory and violent especially when you look at them within the context of the country's political history and how public hangings of influential figures, such as [Zulfikar Ali Bhutto](#), have been manipulated by those in power to advance their agendas and propagate specific narratives - narratives that have had long term consequences on the political fabric of the country. When looking at posts and content such as this, it is also important to consider the role that state institutions such as the military and judiciary have played and continue to play in Pakistani politics. Pakistan has had a history of military managing or meddling with civilian state institutions. Free press and journalism have been relentlessly monitored and restricted during these periods of military rule, with censorship and intimidation being a regular occurrence. Journalists and citizens encounter a variety of problems, including threats of assault and harassment. Pakistan currently ranks 150th out of 180 nations in the [2023 World Press Freedom Index](#), indicating a striking deterioration in freedom of the press. As the country progresses, it is critical that authorities take relevant steps to ensure freedom of the press, especially due to the fact that no democracy can function efficiently without it.

As Pakistan approaches its upcoming general elections scheduled for February, familiar patterns seem to be repeating themselves. Censorship of the press and journalists has been ongoing before and after Imran Khan was ousted as the Prime Minister after a no-confidence motion in April 2022. There have been multiple riots by supporters of his party since then and the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), has increasingly censored media outlets and journalists who are critical of the state. Additionally, there have been multiple

state-imposed internet shutdowns in an attempt to silence dissent and disrupt online political campaigning by certain political parties. Since May 2023, former prime minister Imran Khan has been in jail, and his party members are being severely restricted by authorities from freely contesting elections.

In Pakistan, social media and digital platforms have played a huge role in amplifying journalistic freedom. These platforms allow journalists and media organizations to quickly reach a much larger audience than was conventionally possible before. However, this has also meant that a lot of journalists and news agencies have been unable to maintain their standards of what content is “newsworthy”, and many times share content that is nothing but sensational, and is intended to bring in views - which is good for business. Journalists are pressured by media houses to report and sensationalize news, reflecting the severe absence of ethical journalism standards in the industry. We have also seen a shift in the industry where news reporting is no longer a monopoly maintained by journalists. Pakistan has seen an increasing trend of ‘Youtubers,’ ‘political commentators’, and ‘influencers’ spreading disinformation under the guise of news in the country.

The speech provided no useful information and led to more instability in the country leading up to the [May 9th events](#) in the country when riots broke out in cities after Imran Khan was ousted and military official buildings were attacked. What's more alarming is that this particular speech incited public opinion towards attacking public officials who can be in the guise of military officials, politicians, and any other official believed to be working for a political opponent other than the proclaimed party who made this statement.

When determining what kind of content should be allowed to stay up on social media platforms, content moderators should keep in mind these regional and political contexts. How certain content could escalate offline and online violence should especially be considered. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press can be achieved without having to resort to blatant violent speech. In content removal and guideline development, Meta should encourage governments to adhere to appropriate protocols for submitting content removal requests. The Pakistani government has had the capability to monitor and censor online material and has in the past issued draconian laws for social media platforms in February 2020, which allow them to erase “unlawful” information within 24 hours. These restrictions have been criticized for limiting freedom of expression and stifling dissent of users online. The 2016 [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act \(PECA\)](#) also gives authorities powers to monitor and prohibit internet information. Therefore, it is essential that the government establishes a well-defined set of guidelines and protocols that prioritize human rights guiding principles and the freedom of the press. The justification for content removal should not be based on its opposition to the state or its advocacy for causes such as women's and trans rights - which are often misunderstood as ‘un-Islamic,’ ‘immoral,’ ‘vulgar’ and ‘immodest.’

These steps will help in the democratization and de-escalation of political tensions both in online and offline platforms, while simultaneously improving the quality of journalism in the country.

*To the read the Oversight Board's full decision on this case:

<https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/fb-57spp63y/>

**To read see all submitted Public Comments: <https://www.oversightboard.com/news/>