[**Yet another ban**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1613929/yet-another-ban)

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PAKISTAN has earned the sobriquet ‘Banistan’. Bans on almost all popular social media sites having been in place at some point in the past decade or so. The latest target is the popular video-sharing app TikTok that has been blocked for the second time on the orders of the Peshawar High Court, after it was blocked in October by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) under the pretext of the application not doing enough to block ‘obscene’ content.

However, PTA had unblocked TikTok after over a week in October when it said an understanding had been reached with the company for content moderation in Pakistan. This is reflected in the TikTok transparency report for July to December, 2020, which shows that globally, the second highest number of videos — more than eight million — were taken down from TikTok in Pakistan in keeping with the enforcement of its community guidelines, which include no tolerance of adult and sexually explicit content or violence, bullying and harassment. The highest number of videos removed by TikTok upon any government’s request was more than 14,000, in Pakistan.

This shows that TikTok is cooperating with the Pakistani authorities, something PTA testified before the Peshawar High Court recently. But the censorship route seems to rule, with several past precedents of entire bans making it seem much more routine.

This is a dangerous reality for the basic rights of Pakistani citizens, as well as for the economy with its burgeoning tech ecosystem.

TikTok was removed even though it was cooperating.

With nearly 50m downloads of TikTok in Pakistan till date, and almost 30m daily active users, it is a wildly popular application. What makes it unique is the user-friendly interface which does not require high literacy for one to use it effectively. This explains its popularity particularly in smaller towns and villages in Pakistan, as well as among the underprivileged social class that does not find much clout on elite-dominated creative platforms like Instagram and YouTube.

TikTok uses are varied. Like any other platform, all the content is generated by users. The biggest market for it is entertainment, and the beauty of it is that it is not like entertainment on television with its multimillion-rupee productions showcasing mostly privileged lifestyles; it is, in fact, purely local entertainment that brings forth culture, humour, satire, values and varied lifestyles to people’s phones. It is also used for public messaging — the governor of Punjab had engaged top influencers on TikTok to spread the message of safety precautions necessary for Covid-19, something they did effectively.

At a time when the unemployment rate is high amongst the youth, tech platforms act as saviours by harnessing young people’s creative and innovative prowess so that they can earn and be a source of support for their families, especially as the economic crisis is exacerbated by the pandemic. Several TikTokers have transitioned to TV, advertisements and the movies. This should be celebrated as it expands talent recruitment through personal networks to one based on organic popularity based on talent, skill and creativity. This innovation does not deserve the axe of moral policing.

TikTok is also used increasingly by businesses to market their products, which is done through influencers on the app who use creative ways to promote products — and earn well while at it. This is apart from the adverts that businesses can promote through TikTok directly.

Is it fair that the decision-makers, who have most likely never used the app themselves, should resort to moral policing and ban TikTok for millions of citizens?

Apart from being a cause of concern for TikTok users and violating the right to freedom of speech and livelihood which are guaranteed by the Constitution, such bans have wider implications for the economy. In an ecosystem where decision-makers in all organs of the state are so eager to ban and block entire technology platforms, it does not paint an attractive picture for investors, or for those seeking to do business with Pakistan.

The Pakistani IT sector is estimated to be worth $3.5 billion, according to the Board of Investment. Pakistani start-ups have been bringing in millions of dollars. Only recently, the Pakistani women-led startup Sehat Kahani raised $1m investment to expand virtual health services in the country. Growth potential and investments can be stymied by such arbitrary decisions.

The reality — indicated by PTA’s track record — is that there is a concerted effort on the part of the Pakistani state to bully internet platforms into submission in order to satiate its censorship whims and silence dissent online.

Courts and the legislature must keep in mind the long-term implications of bans, and prioritise rights and the economic well-being of Pakistani citizens in their decision-making, instead of repeating past mistakes.

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