Social media curbs

BY WAQAS YOUNAS | 2/23/2020

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| MOST of you reading these lines are strangers to me. What impression would I leave if, on our first meeting, I asked you questions about your salary, home address and family? It would not be a good one. Not only is this impolite, forcing you to answer would also be a violation of your right to privacy.  Recently, the cabinet approved a set of rules on the basis of which it can now ask social media companies for any of their users` data, eg you. Failure to comply would result in heavy fines or blocking. These rules are scary. They need more thought, and mercifully the prime minister has agreed as much.  When a government passes rules or regulations that violate a fundamental constitutional right, the signal it sends to the common man is not of a state that applies the law without prejudice but of a state that uses the law to coerce its citizens.  There are two broad issues with this new set of rules. First is the government`s miscalculation in judging its power over social media companies. Second is the personal and economic trouble this may bring.  It is unlikely that our state can bend the social media giants to its will. Judging from a recent Facebook report, it is quite clear that Pakistan is not a major source of revenue. So it is unlikely we can make these companies bend by coercion. Also, these are publicly traded companies. Hence, they are answerable to their shareholders and governments (CEOs making visits to Senate committees is quite the norm in the US).  Also, selling people`s data would not put any CEO in a good light.  Such a set of rules also endangers the well-being of people and the economy. How is the people`s well-being put at risk by these rules? Well, the rules say that social media platforms would have to disclose any data to an investigation agency. Since we do not have data protection laws, state institutions here are not bound to take measures to protect our sensitive personal data so, we are in trouble if our personal information, like bank statements, passwords or credit card numbers, falls into the wrong hands.  Such hastily drafted rules would also affect people`s economic well-being. For example, a while ago, a Punjabi villager with a passion for food started a YouTube channel with videos of him cooking local cuisine. He now has close to two million YouTube followers, and makes a decent living from it. This would have been impossible without social media. He must also be contributing to the economy by creating new jobs, supporting existing ones, or by buying supplies from local vendors.  Many people now make a living from these social media portals. Since the newrules can shut down a social media application, would this not deter entrepreneurs and investors? Would this not also make the economy suffer as a result? This rushed set of rules is also confusing because of its vagueness. It says that a national coordinator and committees would be established for monitoring. But how these would be set up is not clear. It is also not clear whether the financial costs to set them up were considered given the government`s austerity drive. The rules also cast a wide net by stating that `social media companies will take due cognisance of the religious, cultural, ethnic and national security sensitivities of Pakistan`. Because of these vague words, almost anything said on social media can be held against them.  We must also not forget that social media is used by bad guys all the time to spread hate content, abuse children and harass people. So to counter all this, the rules must be brought forward not in a rush but after careful deliberation. A well-thought-out policy would notonly reduce confusion, it could also increase our safety and economic prosperity, as well as spur local innovation. For example, the government can fund various undergraduate engineering projects.  For one, it can fund a project thatdetects and reports hate content within an hour of its publishing, instead of the six hours per the regulation, using AL But any such rules, policies or laws must not be used to curb dissent. Dissent and opposing views which do not promote crime are not harmful.  Lastly, we all must consider one more thing. Do we not want a country where we can raise our sons and daughters to think critically and to be able to handle opposing views? Do we not need our future doctors, lawyers, journalists, generals, politicians and engineers to submit to reason and be able to think critically? Do we not want a country whose people push the frontiers of science, technology and the arts? If so, then we need thinl(ing individuals. We need people who can function by holding opposing ideas in their minds. We should not, then, curb dissent but accept it. We do need rules and regulations for holding bad guys accountable, but not for curbing free speech.  The writer is a freelance contributor.  wyounas@lumsalumni.pk Twitter: @wyounas |