

Digital Terrorism and Free speech = Balancing National Security with Civil Liberties

Outline

1. Introduction

2. Upsurge in digital terrorism and threat to the national security.

3. Nations undermine civil liberties in the name of national security

a. Dictatorship government in China and North Korea control the flow of information to their public for ^{sake of} national security.

b. Frequent internet disruptions in Pakistan, especially during major events to maintain peace.

c. Recent efforts to ban Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

d. PECA Amendment bill, 2025 ~~alleges~~ that deliberately stifles public opinion in the name of national security.

e. Significant economic losses occurred in Pakistan along with lack of freedom of speech due to unlawful internet restrictions in Pakistan.

4. Balancing the national security and civil liberties

- a. Regulating ~~of~~ the flow of content rather than banning.
- b. Formulating ~~of~~ the stringent policies ~~rather~~ against misinformation and controversial data.
- c. Empowering the regulatory authorities to ensure ^{both} national security and freedom of speech.

In Pakistan, whenever opposition protested in 2004, the nation faced internet disruptions and difficulty in sending messages, photos, and videos. Most of the time, the government claimed that sharks ate the internet cables and they were working on the maintainance. In the name of national security and safety, there are several incidents that have compromised public opinion. Digital terrorism has become ~~common~~ widespread nowadays because of globalization and easier internet availability. However, the threat of digital terrorism does not legitimize stifling of ^{the} civil liberties. Freedom of expression is the right of every individual that should not be ~~be~~ undermined. However, the government should control misinformation and regulate ~~to ensure~~ the controversial websites and content. So, digital terrorism is a reality and national security is a necessary necessity, but banning of public opinion and diversion is not the ultimate solution to this menace.

The upsurge in digital terrorism is concerning globally. Digital terrorism includes all those activities that appear as a threat for nation's security and economy. The unprecedented rise in terrorist attacks are ~~due~~ because of globalization. The other activities, such as cyberstalking, spreading of deep fake videos, online harassment, propaganda against rival parties or even ^{rival} nations, online fraud, hacking of personal IDs, social engineering, ransomware attacks, and AI-generated content, all are included in the digital terrorism. These activities not only undermine national security but also target women and girls. Hence, digital terrorism also facilitate gender-based violence. Many rival parties and opposition government deliberately use digital grounds to spread their propaganda, and they ~~compro~~ become a threat to nation's peace and security.

Many dictatorship regimes, such as China and North Korea have complete control over flow of data and information to their nations. Even they regulate and monitor websites and certain data is allowed in these countries while there is complete ban on other websites. Similarly, Economist Intelligence Unit changed the status of Pakistan from hybrid regime to the authoritarian regime. It was ~~due~~ ^{because} of particular measures of stifling the diverse opinions and controlling of freedom of speech. Pakistan is inspired from firewall of China, however, direct control of nation's internet with the aim of reducing digital terrorism only compromises civilian liberties. According to ^{universal} Human Rights Declaration, freedom of expression is a fundamental right of an individual. The democratic nations' principles are based on inclusivity and participation in decision-making ~~but~~. If government imposes restrictions on the expression of public opinion then the true essence

of democracy will be compromised.

Pakistan has faced frequent internet disruptions, especially in the last year. These attempts of throttling of dissent were observed mainly during major protests or unrest in the country. The government claimed that the purpose of restrictions of internet was to ensure national security and maintain peace in the country. However, these acts of the government were questionable because civil liberties and freedom of speech were compromised. Similarly, government's ban on X (twitter) was also aimed at citing national security concerns. There must be balanced approach to maintain national security while ensuring free speech. The strict and transparent surveillance mechanisms should be created in which regulatory authorities should be accountable for their actions. The internet disruptions and restrictions on internet access not only violates ^{the} dissemination

but also ~~bring~~ bring heavy financial losses to the economy.

Another recent controversial act of the government of Pakistan is Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (2025) amendment bill (PECA). The objective of this amendment is to regulate and ensure national security and control digital terrorism. A social media regulatory authority has been created that will review fake and controversial ^{data} ~~control~~. The government argues that PECA amendment bill will enhance digital security and will block all the fake news and misinformation. However, the journalists, social media activists, and other critics condemned the bill but despite heavy criticism the bill was passed. This highlights ~~that~~ the violation of fundamental rights of expression. Any journalist can be jailed for three years or prosecuted with heavy fine of two

million rupees for the criticism on ~~of~~ ^{the} government. ~~This~~ ~~at~~ ~~done~~ the PECA amendment bill demonstrates an imbalance of national security and civil liberties violating basic fundamental rights.

Additionally, throttling of free speech for the sake of national security incurred heavy economic losses to the global domestic production. According to ~~the~~ World Bank, Pakistan's digital economy contributes 1% to the GDP. The entrepreneurs, freelancers, online businesses, social media platforms, and E-commerce generate capital income for the state and maintain inflow of dollars to ensure economic stability. According to ~~the~~ State Bank of Pakistan, freelancers and small businesses contributed \$400 million dollars in exports, ranking globally fourth in freelancing earning. However, internet ~~re~~ disruptions brought heavy losses to the ~~from~~ freelancers and online businesses. Many companies shifted ~~it~~ from Pakistan because of slow internet

and heavy restrictions by the government. The national security still remained threatened, and the unrest continued in the country. These factors indicate that national security can't be ensured through ban on free speech. There must be ~~regulation~~ ~~and~~ balance between national security regulation and civil liberties to maintain peace and control digital terrorism.

To create a balance between national security and freedom of speech, the government should create regulatory authorities that work with transparency. The regulatory platforms must be ~~be~~ held accountable for their actions, and rules should be formulated to ensure freedom of expression. An example of balanced approach is European GDPR (general data protection regulation) that focuses on individual user privacy and DSA (Digital services act) to regulate online platforms to create safety.

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environment by managing harmful content and promoting transparency. The privacy concerns must be ensured, and ^{the} government should provide safer digital platforms. The online content should be regulated ~~and~~ to prevent ^{the} spread of fake news and digital terrorism.

Additionally, cyber security threats and digital terrorism can be controlled by international collaborations. Cross-border terrorism threatens peace and stability of a country. In Pakistan, multiple terrorists attacks ~~incidents~~ occurred in last year. The terrorists organizations like Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Balochistan Liberation Army ~~Front~~ (BLA) were mainly involved. These organizations worked smoothly across the borders from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Therefore, international collaboration must be adopted to ensure control of cross-border terrorism. Freedom of speech ~~B~~

It should be allowed as it is basic fundamental right but transparent regulation of online content is necessary to ensure national security.

To sum up, Digital terrorism include many harmful acts, such as online harassment, blackmailing, cyber stalking, spreading misinformation, creating unrest through false news, and propaganda against the government. The digital terrorism has risen in the recent years, and it is deeply concerning for the national security and peace of the country. However, national security can not be ensured through freedom stifling of freedom of speech. There must be a balance between national security and civil liberty. Ban on free speech in the name of national security violates fundamental rights of a man. There must be transparent regulatory authorities.

These authorities should work to maintain data privacy and control controversial ~~data~~ ^{content}. However, the ultimate power of regulatory authorities may suppress digital rights and limit the freedom of expression. Hence, these social media regulatory authorities should be held accountable for their actions to maintain peace across the country.