

## REMOVAL AND BLOCKING OF UNLAWFUL ONLINE CONTENT (PROCEDURES, OVERSIGHT AND SAFEGUARD) RULES, 2021

The Cabinet in October 2021 notified the amended version of the Rules under S.37 of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016. Following several petitions filed against the heavily criticised Rules, the Prime Minister Imran Khan formulated a committee to amend the draft after consultation with stakeholders. This timeline tracks the developments since the beginning of the first draft being made public in February 2020.

**FEB. 11, 2020**

MMfD [acquired](#) a copy of the notified Rules, then-titled "Citizen Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020". The Rules were notified on January 21 by the Cabinet.

**FEB. 12, 2020**

Civil society bodies release a [joint statement](#) declaring the Rules a political move to control the internet and to silence opposing voices.

**FEB. 13, 2020**

A coalition of global technology companies, Asia Internet Coalition (AIC), [expressed](#) concerns over the Rules, calling them broad reaching.

**FEB. 17, 2020**

AIC, in a [detailed statement](#) addressed to PM Imran Khan, said that the Rules would make it "extremely difficult" for AIC members to provide services to users within Pakistan.

**FEB. 19, 2020**

Owing to the criticism of civil society and private sector, a source close to the PM Imran Khan [told DRM](#) that the Rules will not be implemented in their current form, as directed by the PM in a closed-door meeting he chaired.

**FEB. 20, 2020**

Journalists union, lawyers and civil society [launched](#) a nationwide campaign to demand revocation of the Rules.

**FEB. 21, 2020**

Journalists unions, lawyers, and civil society [held](#) press conference in Quetta, rejecting the Rules, and demanded immediate de-notification.

**FEB. 27, 2020**

MMfD [submitted](#) its key concerns, objections and recommendations on the Rules to parliamentarians.

**FEB. 28, 2020**

The government [announced](#) the beginning of the consultative process on the Rules. The Consultative Committee was formed under the guidance of the PM, and under the convening of Chairman PTA Amir Azeem Bajwa.

**FEB. 29, 2020**

Over 100 rights groups and individuals, through a [statement](#), boycotted the consultative process initiated by the government, unless the Cabinet approval on the Rules is withdrawn.

**MARCH 2, 2020**

PTA [held](#) the first consultative meeting on the Rules.

**MARCH 10, 2020**

PTA [held](#) the second consultative meeting on the Rules attended by various stakeholders, where the committee discussed "setting the clear objectives to be achieved from the Rules and Consultation process be focused on the attainment of desired objectives."

**MARCH 19, 2020**

The then-UNSR for the Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion, David Kaye, and UNSR on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Michel Forst [raised serious concerns](#) on the Rules in regards to the international human rights law obligations of the government of Pakistan to promote and protect freedom of expression.

**MAY 18, 2020**

PTA [shared](#) a referendum-style survey on its website for comments on the Rules, as part of its consultation process. MMfD rejected this survey and maintained that the concerns previously highlighted by the civil society through various statements should first be addressed.

**JUNE 3, 2020**

Authorities officially [began](#) consultation process on the Rules despite the boycott. MMfD co founder wrote an [open letter](#) to PTA highlighting concerns about the process.

**JUNE 4, 2020**

The first consultation meeting was held with digital rights and media groups. Only one representative of civil society attended the meeting, while majority continued their boycott.

**JUNE 5, 2020**

AIC [submitted its response](#) to the Rules in response to the call for feedback by PTA. It highlighted that the Rules should first be denotified, and mentions that the first version of the Rules would significantly alter the landscape for digital platforms, and would make it "extremely difficult" for them to operate in Pakistan.

**AUG. 17, 2020**

Islamabad High Court (IHC) [issued notices](#) to PTA, Ministry of IT and Federal Government under a petition filed by Asad Baig challenging the Rules, and requesting the Court to declare them ultra vires.

**OCT. 2, 2020**

[News reports](#) claiming that the MoITT had requested the Cabinet to approve updated version of the Rules, now titled, "Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2020" are published. PTA fails to share the updated Rules despite requests.

**OCT. 7, 2020**

AIC, in a letter to the PM Imran Khan, [expresses concerns](#) over lack of consultation on the Rules, and over not making the new version public before seeking Cabinet's approval.

**OCT. 23, 2020**

AIC issued a [statement](#) objecting to the process through which the Rules were formulated. It said that this is "causing international companies to re-evaluate their view of the regulatory environment in Pakistan, as well as their willingness to operate in the country."

**NOV. 2, 2020**

IHC ordered PTA to submit [published](#) Rules within 90 days, while hearing a petition challenging the ban on the video-sharing app TikTok.

**NOV. 18, 2020**

MoITT shared the notified [copy of the new Rules](#) on its website. [Initial analysis](#) depicts that the Rules give broad powers to PTA over online content that go beyond the scope of s.37 of PECA.

**NOV. 20, 2020**

AIC [said](#) that the data localisation requirements in the Social Media Rules will "damage the ability of people to access a free and open internet and shut Pakistan's digital economy off from the rest of the world."

**DEC. 1, 2020**

A "corrected version" of Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards), Rules 2020" was uploaded on the website of the MoITT. In the file, Section 4 (ii) of the Rules has been amended to create hatred, contempt and disaffection for the government as unlawful.

**DEC. 3, 2020**

Pakistan's civil society and multiple rights bodies [condemned](#) the Rules, calling for the draconian laws to be denotified, and Section 37 of the cybercrime act repealed immediately.

**DEC. 4, 2020**

Chief Justice of the IHC [held](#) that the Social Media Rules notified under Section 37 of the PECA, 2016 are "prima facie in violation of Article 19 and 19-A of the Constitution" during the hearing of a petition filed against the banning of TikTok.

**DEC. 17, 2020**

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) filed a [petition](#) in the IHC to declare the Rules 'null and void'.

**DEC. 17, 2020**

A petition [filed](#) by journalist Amber Rahim Shamsi and TikToker Ashfaq Jutt in IHC asked the court to declare that "Section 37(1) of PECA 2016 is unconstitutional for being vague, imprecise, overboard, excessively delegated and non-delegation."

**DEC. 18, 2020**

The IHC [issued](#) notices to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) in the writ petition filed by the PFUJ against the Rules.

**DEC. 21, 2020**

The IHC [issued](#) notices to the PTA and the Federal Government in the case filed by Amber Rahim Shamsi against the Rules.

**JAN. 5, 2021**

The IHC [remarked](#) that it would rather be better for social media companies, like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, to open their offices in Pakistan to better deal with and request immediate comments on controversial matters.

**JAN. 22, 2021**

MMfD [published](#) a detailed legal analysis of the Rules.

**JAN. 23, 2021**

Journalist Tanzila Mazhar [challenged](#) the legality of the Rules in the IHC by arguing that they go beyond the remit prescribed in the parent act, i.e. PECA 2016.

**JAN. 25, 2021**

The Attorney General (AG) of Pakistan, Khalid Javed Khan, [appeared](#) before the IHC and said that the Government has agreed to review the rules in light of all the criticism received.

**JAN. 26, 2021**

The IHC [issued](#) notices to the Ministry of Law and PTA in the latest case filed against the Rules.

**FEB. 8, 2021**

The AIC [submitted](#) a letter to the AG in response to his comment in the IHC on January 25, expressing agreement to review the Social Media Rules in light of all the criticism received.

**FEB. 10, 2021**

After agreeing to review the Social Media Rules on behalf of the Federal Government, the AG [invited](#) few selected stakeholders to a consultation meeting scheduled for February 19.

**FEB. 19, 2021**

The AG, in the multi-stakeholder meeting, [said](#) he will present his recommendations to the Federal Government for revising the Rules, after admitting that the Rules contained significant flaws.

**FEB. 22, 2021**

The IHC [directed](#) the Federal Government and the AG to consult more stakeholders on the amendment of the Social Media Rules and submit a report to the Court.

**FEB. 26, 2021**

The IHC [asked](#) the AG to submit a report on the Rules after holding multi-stakeholder consultations, and granted an extension of one month to update the Court in the next hearing fixed for April 2.

**MARCH 25, 2021**

The PTA [sent](#) a registration form to social media companies to appoint a local representative and provide a local address, as prescribed under Rule 9(5) of the Social Media Rules.

**MARCH 30, 2021**

The AG [recommended](#) to Prime Minister Imran Khan that further and broad-based consultations are required for the framing of comprehensive rules that govern the regulation of social media under the Rules.

**APRIL 2, 2021**

IHC [told](#) the Committee appointed by the PM Imran Khan to submit detailed report on Social Media Rules on May 10.

**APRIL 7, 2021**

The Committee chaired by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, formed on the directions of PM Imran Khan, [invited](#) selected stakeholders for consultations,

**APRIL 19, 2021**

The Committee [said](#) that it will share revisions in the Rules within fortnight.

**JUNE 21, 2021**

The MoITT [shared](#) the "Corrected version of the draft" on its website, asking stakeholders to submit feedback by June 28, 2021.

**JULY 5, 2021**

Media Matters for Democracy submitted response to the MoITT on Social Media Rules. Access it here: [\[PDF\]](#)

**OCTOBER 15, 2021**

The updated Social Media Rules were [notified](#) by the Ministry.

**OCTOBER 16, 2021**

Media Matters for Democracy [publishes](#) a statement expressing concern on the newly passed Social Media Rules, and calls them ultra vires.