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Pakistan's New Bill Seeks to Curb Online Obscenity

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, is considering a new law aimed at regulating digital content and curbing obscene material on online platforms. The Prohibition of Obscenity and Vulgarly on Digital Media Bill 2025, introduced by PPP Member of the National Assembly Dr. Syeda Shahida Rehmani, proposes strict penalties for violations, including fines ranging from Rs500,000 to Rs100 million and possible imprisonment.

The bill defines “digital media” broadly, covering social media apps, streaming services, websites, and other online or offline platforms. It targets a wide range of content, including videos, images, dramas, films, songs, advertisements, and live broadcasts. Prohibited material includes sexual conversations, extramarital relations, semi-nude dressing, drug use, and content considered against public morality. It also criminalizes ridicule of religion, religious figures, cultural values, the hijab or purdah, and the family system.

To enforce the law, the bill proposes establishing an authority, a board, and a tribunal to oversee compliance. The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) would

investigate violations, while prosecutions would be conducted under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016.

The proposed board would consist of eight members: two religious scholars, two psychologists, one woman from civil society, a media law expert, a media professional, and a federal government representative serving as chair. The board would monitor content, recommend fines, and take action on its initiative.

A three-member tribunal would decide legal cases under the law. One member must be qualified to serve as a high court judge, while the other two include a media professional and an IT expert. First-time offenses may result in up to one year of imprisonment and a Rs500,000 fine, while repeat violations could lead to up to five years in prison and a Rs10 million fine, particularly if the content involves religion, women, children, or family systems.

Digital platforms would face strict compliance requirements. They must report uploaded content within 15 days and remove prohibited material within 24 hours of notice. Platforms must retain records for three years. Failure to comply could result in fines of Rs50 million for a first violation and Rs100 million for a second, with repeated offenses potentially leading to suspension of licenses or service bans. All offenses under the proposed law are non-bailable and non-compoundable.

The PECA law of 2016 marked Pakistan's first major attempt to regulate cybercrime, but it has faced criticism for limiting freedom of expression and being misused against journalists. Senior journalist Mazhar Abbas cautioned lawmakers to learn from past mistakes, noting that the previous law was used hastily and against political opponents.

The bill is set to be reviewed by the National Assembly's standing committee before a final vote. Lawmakers will face the challenge of balancing public morality, security, and freedom of expression in Pakistan's rapidly growing digital space.