

# Online crimes

By Fatima Bhutto

11<sup>th</sup> February 2009

Did you know... new Pakistani laws against 'cyber terrorism' threaten death or prison to satirists, spammers and activists alike

Pakistan's so called democratic government has introduced a bill before parliament – the prevention of electronic crimes ordinance – that aims to censor our already frightened media and censored citizenry. According to the bill, anyone found guilty of "cyber terrorism" – an undefined crime – is liable to face the death penalty.

The standards of what constitutes "cyber crimes" don't follow internationally recognised standards; the government's vague bill threatens anyone guilty of "spoofing" or "spamming" or the "character assassination" of any member of state with prison sentences. Any of the articles I've written critical of my country's role in the war on terror or questioning the corruption of the state could constitute "spoofing" (the bill doesn't elaborate on whether it is satire that the Pakistan People's Party government is fundamentally opposed to or simply jolly fun-making).

The bill is an escalation of intimidation from the state. In October 2008 the government announced that the terrorism wing of the country's Federal Investigation Authority would be tasked with hunting down the "anti-democratic" forces that were circulating YouTube videos and text messages aimed at discrediting the ruling party's politicians.

Because the press is muzzled, no voices were raised in protest at the announcement that text messages had become treasonous devices in Pakistan. So now we have an actual law about to be put into place, farcically silencing those of us who are not afraid to speak. I'm almost certain I've assassinated some characters in the process of being a journalist – Pakistan is, at present, the only country in the world run by two former criminals. The president and prime minister, Asif Zardari and Yousef Raza Gilani, have both served time in prison under a gamut of charges, including but not limited to murder, narcotics, corruption and extortion.

Another odious bill, the national reconciliation ordinance, already passed in parliament has cleared Pakistan's politicians of 20 years' worth of corruption cases against them and includes a stipulation that will make it virtually impossible to file charges of misconduct against any sitting parliamentarian. The NRO was used to clear Pakistan's ruling party members of other crimes, surpassing our already crippled judiciary, and placing those in power above the law. Criticism of the NRO was unsurprisingly muted in the Pakistani press. Did you know that these 403 words could land me a jail sentence? I've spoofed, I've defamed, and I've disseminated, all deadly crimes.