



An inevitable showdown

News: The Government's notice to Twitter after it reinstated several handles that mentioned a controversial hashtag, which the former wanted to be blocked, marks a critical point in an already uneasy relationship between a powerful government and an influential technology platform.

The confrontation:

1. A showdown seems inevitable now, what with the Government threatening Twitter with penal action for not complying with its orders.
2. The issue pertains to tweets put out by some handles on the ongoing farmer protests as also a hashtag that suggested that a farmer genocide was being planned.
3. The Ministry of Electronics and IT ordered these handles (257 URLs and one hashtag) to be blocked on the grounds that they were spreading dangerous misinformation about the protests.
4. Twitter initially complied with the order but then restored these tweets and handles, which included those of media houses.
5. The Government's initial order was issued under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, under which it can direct an intermediary to block any information for public access "in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states or public order or for preventing incitement to the commission of any cognizable offence relating to above..."
6. This is the same Section under which hundreds of Chinese apps have been banned in recent months.

Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000

1. The world over, technology platforms have enough safeguards to act as intermediaries without being liable for the content that is published.
2. But Twitter's act of defying the orders as per the law means it is on the slippery territory.
3. Though the use of Section 69A has been often criticised for the secrecy surrounding the process, it was upheld by the Supreme Court in the landmark Shreya Singhal vs Union of India (2015).
4. The Court then was satisfied with the safeguards available. The technology platform's stance may perhaps even lead to a legal challenge to the provisions of the Section.



5. On the other hand, while there are many grounds on which this Government's handling of the farm protests can be criticised, including its hypersensitivity to any criticism, reflected in the FIRs filed against many journalists, it has to be unequivocally said that the hashtag that it wanted to be blocked was not merely distasteful but seriously problematic, and indefensible on the grounds of freedom of speech.
6. In a very sensitive setting, one that at least at one point was simmering with the potential for large-scale violence, provocation of any kind is unacceptable. What further happens in this face-off will be of interest not just for the two parties but for the governments of the world as well as the platforms of the world.

The way forward in Myanmar

News: The coup in Myanmar coincided with the first month of the Biden administration in the U.S., which has promised to bring back the values of democracy and respect for human rights to the core of the U.S. foreign policy.

The economy of Sanctions and the Coups

1. Notwithstanding the western sanctions before 2010, China, Thailand and Singapore were the key trading partners of Myanmar.
2. The present reality is no different. Singapore was reportedly the largest foreign investor in Myanmar in 2020, accounting for 34% of the overall approved investment.
3. Given that the military has been able to economically withstand sanctions by striking deals with Asian countries in the past, sanctions are unlikely to bring any major political change.
4. The limited European trade with Myanmar that started after 2010 benefits the poor — the European Union's 'Everything But Arms' scheme targets the poor in Myanmar's garment industry.
5. The scheme allows the world's least-developed countries, such as Myanmar, to export most goods to the EU free of duties.

Ethics of Coups and Nationalism

1. The old debate around the need for accountability for crimes against humanity will resurface.
2. As political changes got underway in 2010, many generals, such as Than Shwe, who was the de-facto head of Myanmar from 1992 to 2011 and was on the radar of the international community for perpetuating a regime of human



rights abuses, quietly vanished from the scene. This bred a culture of impunity.

3. During the 2017 Rohingya crisis, senior military officials brazenly exploited social media to mobilise public support for brutality against Rohingyas.

China's influence

A critical international player in Myanmar is China. The international community, particularly the West, has to factor in China's multi-layered influence on Myanmar.

International mechanisms

1. Many international mechanisms comprising Western and Asian countries that were formed to coordinate strategies on Myanmar were disbanded after the 2015 election.
2. That the changes in Myanmar were irreversible was the standard thinking. Relevant actors should be brought on a common platform by reviving past mechanisms.

India strikes cautious note on developments in Myanmar

News: India on Thursday struck a cautious note on the developments in Myanmar saying it continues to monitor the situation.

Highlights:

1. India and Myanmar are neighbours with close cultural and people-to-people ties, bolstered by trade, economic, security and defence-related exchanges.
2. India is therefore monitoring the developments closely. India is also engaged on the issue as a member of the U.N. Security Council.
3. India had earlier expressed "deep concern" after the February 1 military takeover was first reported from Myanmar and asked for maintenance of the "rule of law and the democratic process".