

NA adopts prevention of cybercrime bill

ISLAMABAD: It was certainly a big day for the Minister of State for Information Technology and Telecommunication, Anusha Rahman Khan, who got the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crime Bill passed by the National Assembly on Wednesday. However, the occasion was spoiled by her two fellow ruling party lawmakers.

Ms Rahman had been actively involved in preparation of the bill when her party was in the opposition and literally scrambled to the seats across the aisle whenever she sensed potential derailing of her efforts by speakers.

As luck would have it, the bill, which according to cyber rights activists was still harsh, was passed, but not without the usual PML-N's knack of creating crisis out of none issues.

Frantic lobbying by Minister Anusha Rahman sees the controversial bill passed with ease

The bill will now be sent to the PPP-dominated Senate. Considering the previous sittings which saw hard-hitting speeches by the opposition members targeting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family in the wake of the Panama leaks, Wednesday was a routine day.

Ms Rahman presented the bill before the house, which then witnessed speeches by members from the two sides pointing out positives and negatives of the legislation.

Shazia Marri of the PPP said no political party was against the bill bearing in mind its importance to regulate use of cyber space. However, it still carried harsh punishments, she added.

“Minutes of the meeting were misreported by the assembly staff against which I was forced to move a privilege motion. Secondly, the bill was bulldozed through the committee without providing us its hard copies,” she explained.

However, Ms Marri expressed her gratitude to National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, who took notice of her complaints and managed to get them addressed to a certain level.

After the opposition members of the committee registered their complaints with the speaker office that it had overlooked their objections, the speaker brought the two sides to his chamber.

PML-Q's former information technology minister Awais Leghari, who later joined the PML-N, was allowed to speak on the bill, but instead of explaining nuances of the bill based on his experience in the sector, out of the blue he started criticising the opposition benches for what he called their disrespect for the parliamentary practices.

“I am surprised how the speaker office has been used to influence working of the standing committee. To me this is against parliamentary norms,” regretted Mr Leghari, son of former president Farooq Leghari.

He also accused the PTI and PPP members of not taking any interest in the committee.

Noticing that Mr Leghari took a different course and would certainly attract rebuke from the opposition benches, Ms Rahman was seen standing close to him, urging him not to mess up the occasion.

But damage was already done. While Mr Leghari was still delivering his speech, the opposition lawmakers stood up in their seats to protest his remarks.

Dr Arif Alvi of the PTI said special efforts were always taken when normal course of action didn't deliver results, as recently happened in the case of PIA bill. “It was Mr Leghari who has been conspicuous in the committee's meetings by his absence, and the fact can be checked through attendance sheet.”

Dr Azra Fazal Pechuho of the PPP said the way Mr Leghari had objected to the initiative of the speaker it seemed he wasn't happy with this bill coming this far.

However, it was none other than Captain Mohammad Safdar, who yet again proved true to his color when he presented himself as a better Muslim than the opposition lawmakers. He almost created a crisis when he dabbled into Imran Khan's personal life, but it was a complete ignorance from PTI lawmakers which saved the day for the IT minister.

“Only those who are brought up by their legal parents know how to act in a civilised manner. Don't force me to talk about Sita White issue. If you will talk about Panama leaks, I will certainly highlight how you people accept charities in the name of cancer patients,” Captain Safdar retorted to what he said he had overheard some comments from Dr Shireen Mazari of the PTI.

When asked, Dr Mazari told Dawn, “I was only talking to Ms Marri; I don't know what made him angry.”

She said it was him (Captain Safdar) who had messed up the bill and wanted to destroy whatever consensus the opposition and treasury benches had reached on the bill.

During the verbal confrontation between Dr Mazari and Captain Safdar, one could notice how perturbed the IT minister looked.

However, Deputy Speaker Murtaza Javed Abbasi successfully handled the situation going out of control.

Salient features

- Up to five-year imprisonment, Rs10 million fine or both for hate speech, or trying to create disputes and spread hatred on the basis of religion or sectarianism.
- Up to five-year imprisonment, Rs5m fine or both for transferring or copying sensitive basic information.
- Up to Rs50,000 fine for sending messages irritating to others or for marketing purposes. If the crime is repeated, the punishment would be three-month imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs1m.
- Up to three-year imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs500,000 for creating a website for negative purposes.
- Up to one-year imprisonment or a fine of up to Rs1m for forcing an individual into immoral activity, or publishing an individual's picture without consent, sending obscene messages or unnecessary cyber interference.
- Up to seven-year imprisonment, a fine of Rs10m or both for interfering in sensitive data information systems.

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