India's desire for digital sovereignty risks more online surveillance

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It was a major milestone for Koo, which had launched with a focus on Indian languages and a government-friendly stance even as its bigger rival Twitter increasingly locked horns with authorities over its content moderation policies. - File pic

SHORTLY after the Nigerian government blocked Twitter in 2021 for removing a post by the country's president, its verified handle @NigeriaGov appeared on Koo, an Indian microblogging platform that was little known overseas.

It was a major milestone for Koo, which had launched with a focus on Indian languages and a government-friendly stance even as its bigger rival Twitter increasingly locked horns with authorities over its content moderation policies.

It was also a vindication for the Indian government, where many officials are on Koo, and which last month hailed another locally made technology: a mobile operating system, BharOS, to challenge Google, whose Android operating system dominates the country's smartphone market.

"We have a long way to go, but if this happens, monopoly by anybody will go away," said Dharmendra Pradhan, India's skill development and entrepreneurship minister.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been pushing for self-reliance in everything from manufacture to vaccine development and technology, and also trying to rein in global tech firms with laws to limit data transfers,
banning Chinese apps, and policing online content more vigorously.

But India's push for digital sovereignty will have enormous consequences for its 1.4 billion population, tech experts and rights groups warn, with a potential increase in state surveillance and tightening of freedoms in online spaces.

"Digital sovereignty has roots in the intent to control, and is tied to nationalism. There are economic elements too, as data is valuable," said Prateek Waghre, policy director at digital rights organisation Internet Freedom Foundation.

He also points to recent cases of local media firms being hit with lawsuits when standing up to the government.

India is the world's second biggest market for smartphones, and has among the most users on social media platforms.

But big tech firms have been increasingly caught in the government's crosshairs — from a Facebook plan for free Internet access being blocked, to content takedown requests, to ordering Google to change how it markets its Android operating system.

Last month, the Indian government ordered Twitter to remove more than 50 tweets linking to the video of a BBC documentary questioning Modi's leadership during the 2002 riots in Gujarat state, and instructed YouTube to block any uploads of the video.

India is increasingly pushing back against technologies that it believes "will give control over its society and economy to foreign powers", said Abishur Prakash, a geopolitical analyst.

"One reason for countries to make their own technologies is concerns about tech colonisation," said Prakash, co-founder of the Center for Innovating the Future, a think tank.

"There is also growing mistrust of technology from certain countries — like how the West views China's TikTok or Huawei," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

While launching Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan — self-reliant India campaign — during the Covid-19 pandemic, Modi said that using locally made apps would be safer.

But having indigenous tech and storing data locally is not safer without proper safeguards and a robust data protection law to prevent unauthorised access and use, digital experts say, particularly with an operating system where there is a risk that data can be accessed by the government.

BharOS — built by a startup funded by the Indian government — is currently provided to organisations with "stringent privacy and security requirements", the developer said.

Indian authorities have emphasised that countries have a "sovereign right" to use data for the nation's welfare and development.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, which spurred many tech firms to sever ties with the former, was a wake-up call for many countries, including India, said Waghre.

"It raised the question — can this happen to us tomorrow — and how do we protect ourselves?

"China is looked on rather enviously for standing up to big tech and creating its own ecosystem, and many countries have been trying to create something similar for years. Russia's invasion only precipitated the process."

The Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), which displays products and services from member e-commerce platforms, touted as an alternative to Amazon and Walmart, was launched last year and is backed by the government.

Indian authorities are also courting international deals for locally made technologies such as DigiLocker — a cloud-based platform for storing and sharing documents — as well as the Aadhaar digital ID scheme, and real-time payments system UPI.

The writer is from the Reuters news agency