

Malaysia and Singapore take action against online critics

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The rise of social media in Malaysia and its tiny neighbour Singapore is testing the patience of the leaders of two of the most tightly governed countries in the region.

The nations' prime ministers this month issued lawsuits, one against a Singapore blogger and another against an online news service in Malaysia, alleging defamation. Both were the first times that a prime minister had taken legal action against a blogger or online outlet.

While the two cases are unrelated, they come as the ruling parties in each country are grappling with how to regulate an increasingly vocal community of netizens willing to take on sensitive issues not always fully aired by state-leaning media.

In Malaysia, Prime Minister Najib Razak has taken legal action against Malaysiakini, one of the country's best-known online news portals, for publishing comments on the ruling party's involvement in a political crisis in one of Malaysia's federal states. Mr Najib's lawyers said he believed they were defamatory and seditious.

Malaysiakini says the prime minister was given an opportunity to respond to its reports but that he had not taken up the offer.

In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has issued a lawsuit against Roy Ngerng, a 33-year-old healthcare worker, for allegedly implying in a blog that Mr Lee had misappropriated funds in Singapore's state pension system. Mr Ngerng alleged that the rate of return at the Central Provident Fund should be higher on the basis that some of it was invested by Temasek, the country's state investment company, and GIC Private, Singapore's sovereign wealth fund of which Mr Lee is chairman.

However, Temasek said this week that it "does not invest or manage the savings of CPF members". CPF funds are invested by its board in special government securities issued and guaranteed by the government. The proceeds are invested by the government through GIC and the country's monetary authority.

Mr Ngerng's blog has nonetheless resonated with many Singaporeans, squeezed by high property prices, a rising cost of living and strains on the island nation's transport infrastructure amid an influx of immigrants. He plans to hold a rally on Saturday at a park in Singapore to highlight the CPF issue.

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Last week in parliament Mr Lee said the government was “studying carefully” what improvements could be made to the CPF “so that the payouts can keep pace with the cost of living”.

Mr Lee has rejected an offer from Mr Ngerng of damages amounting to \$5,000, plus an apology and has started legal proceedings at the high court to assess damages. Meanwhile, Mr Ngerng has received more than S\$85,000 in a “crowdfunding” campaign to raise funds for his defence.

While Mr Lee and his ruling People’s Action Party have acknowledged the rise of social media – enthusiastically embracing Facebook and Twitter – they have also warned against blind trust in online commentators. “Sometimes, what you read online may not be what it seems,” the party said on its Facebook page this week.

Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at Singapore Management University, said Mr Ngerng’s blog had “certainly struck a chord with some Singaporeans who are also concerned about whether the CPF is as robust as it’s made out to be”.

But he added that Mr Ngerng had made a mistake linking the issue directly with the prime minister, accusing him of “something for which there is no basis at all or is hard to prove”.

Free-speech activists have taken issue with the action by Mr Najib in Malaysia. “The threat of legal action against news media on behalf of a serving prime minister constitutes a potential threat to freedom of information,” said Benjamin Ismail, head of the Asia-Pacific desk for Reporters Without Borders.

However, Mr Najib said: “There is a difference between legitimate criticism and defamation . . . It is my legal team’s opinion that recent allegations by an online news portal overstepped the line.”