

Singapore struggles to control cyberspace

A new policy aimed at regulating websites in Singapore has drawn criticism and revived censorship debates.

Heather Tan Last Modified: 08 Jun 2013 14:37



Singapore, RoS - One of the most wired countries in the world looks set to implement new media regulations seen by some as a bid to stifle independent news and information.

According to the law, websites that frequently report on Singapore news will have to apply for a license under the Media Development Authority. They will be required to pay a deposit of 50,000 Singapore dollars (\$39,500) and will be subjected to government content regulations that demand objectionable content be removed within 24 hours.

So far, ten websites have fallen under the new licence requirements, including Yahoo! Singapore. While nine are state-owned, the authorities have hinted that the new ruling may possibly extend to foreign news websites from next year.

Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim defended the move, saying that the

new rules were only "light touch regulations" and were "not as onerous as what has been made up by some people online".

"It is important for us to put a regulatory framework which is as light as possible to ensure that the sites coming on board that report on Singapore news have to conform to certain minimum standards as far as we are concerned," he said, adding that the rules were not intended to "clamp down" on internet freedom.

However, he had previously told news reporters that Singapore's mainstream media was already "subjected to rules", and the new framework was meant to regularise what was already happening on the internet.

'Draconian' policy

The Southeast Asian city-state has not been known for press freedom. Domestic media is strictly controlled and has been accused of adopting mainly pro-government views.

Human Rights Watch said in a statement on Friday that Singapore's government should withdraw its new licensing requirement as it would "cast a chill" over online communities which would, in turn, limit access to independent media.

"Websites will be forced into the role of private censors on behalf of the government," said Cynthia Wong, senior internet researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Singapore is placing its status as a world-class financial centre at clear risk by extending its record of draconian media censorship to the digital world."

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Lobby group Reporters Without Borders ranked Singapore 149th globally in terms of press freedom below the likes of Afghanistan and Zimbabwe, while US-based organisation Freedom House placed Singapore 150th and classified its level of press freedom as "Not Free".

The controversial policy that took effect this month sparked heated criticism and revived debate

about the Southeast Asian city-state's strict censorship laws.

Close to 2,000 Singaporeans participated in a rally on Saturday to protest the government's new rules.

Organiser Howard Lee said the regulation "violates individual rights" and affects all Singaporeans, not just online. "Any regulation that could potentially affect all citizens and is passed without consultation particularly with those who could be directly affected, is sloppy public policy and cannot possibly be mistaken as the work of a consultative government keen to engage," he said.

Blogger Ravi Philemon addressed the rally: "The Media Development Authority should take its hands off the online world because it is the most open public space Singaporeans have right now," he said. "The regulation will only give the government unlimited power to act arbitrarily against the interests of Singaporeans."

Another protester, 36-year old housewife Clare Yeo, said: "I don't buy anything that the local media says. It is appalling for the government to think that they can take it upon themselves to control the internet. Is it any wonder why we are described as a nanny state?"

To 24-year old law undergraduate Kyle Sim, the worrisome issue was the lack of consultation. "It was heavy handed and done completely out of the blue because all signs before this pointed to a free internet," he said. "What one chooses to read online is ultimately their prerogative. A government cannot control the internet."

More than 150 websites and bloggers also staged a 24-hour blackout demonstration online on Thursday to protest against the new regulations. Most of the sites replaced their homepages with a black page containing information about a protest called #FreeMyInternet.

An online petition which swiftly gathered more than 4,000 signatures was also started, calling for the immediate withdrawal of the policy.

Political impact

Perhaps the biggest implication the policy could have would be on opposition political parties in the lead-up to the country's general elections in 2016.

Opposition leader and secretary-general of the Singapore Democratic Party Chee Soon Juan expressed concerns that the government was trying to stifle political opponents online and said that there was a danger that the government could be seen as "trying to regulate the

opposition's means of communicating with voters before the next elections".

"The next round of elections promises even more Singaporeans visiting our website to learn more about alternative policies," Chee said, noting that his party relied heavily on online means to reach out to voters and disseminate information about events and rallies. "Is this latest move targeted at restricting our ability to campaign freely online? It is unfortunate that the government has taken upon itself to determine what are the 'right things' that Singaporeans can read. It is regrettable that instead of abiding by the people's wishes, the government has instituted measures that will further stymie the progress of democracy in Singapore."

Law professor and nominated member of parliament Eugene Tan told Al Jazeera that, while he saw the new licensing regime as "an ambitious attempt" to harmonise both online and traditional news platforms, there was still "palpable concern" that the government was seeking to censor the internet.

"I don't think this new regulatory regime was conveyed well and subsequent attempts to clarify seemed to have made matters worse," Tan said. "What is the 'right thing' cannot be regulated; instead, people should be equipped to have the power of discernment and discretion to deal with the information and misinformation in both traditional and online news platforms."

He also noted the government's dilemma in winning over public opinion due to its implementation of recent policies. "Each setback will only add on to earlier setbacks and may contribute to declining trust in the government.

"The government must urgently stem this decline in trust and confidence or it will go into the next general election with a distinct disadvantage. It needs to show that its policies are not only effective but have deep legitimacy."