

Singaporeans rally against new govt rules for websites

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Singapore: Around 2,000 Singaporeans led by local bloggers attended a rally yesterday to protest against new government licensing rules for news websites that they say curtail freedom of expression. The peaceful, three-hour rally, held at a free-speech park called Speakers' Corner, was organised by a coalition of bloggers called "Free My Internet" to oppose the regulations which came into force this month. "The message today is that the government must trust us, and stop treating us like babies," said Choo Zheng Xi, a spokesman for the group and co-founder of popular political news website The Online Citizen. "It is an international embarrassment when governments around the world are working to deregulate the Internet, and Singapore, one of the wealthiest nations per capita, is going in the opposite direction," he said.

Black-screen protestThe group had also organised an "Internet blackout" on Thursday, where over 130 bloggers in the city-state replaced their homepages with black screens featuring the words "#FreeMyInternet". Under the rules, websites with at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore every month that publish at least one local news article per week over a period of two months must obtain an annual licence. Websites granted a licence will have to remove "prohibited content" such as articles that undermine "racial or religious harmony" within 24 hours of being notified by Singapore's media regulator, the Media Development Authority. The new rules have sparked anger in the city-state's robust blogging and social media community which has accused the government of a lack of consultation and raised fears the regulations are aimed at muzzling free expression. Blogs and social media have gained popularity as alternative sources of news and opinion in Singapore, where mainstream newspapers are perceived to be pro-government. Rally speakers, wearing black shirts with the words "#FreeMyInternet" emblazoned on the front, took potshots at the mainstream media, with some of them urging the government to rescind the rules and others slamming the lack of consultation. A mock tombstone was put up in one corner of the venue with the words: "RIP Freedom of Speech. Death by Regulation. Died in 2013." After the rally, which organisers said attracted around 2,000 people at its peak, the tombstone was carried to the front of the stage and protestors laid flowers at its base. The government has sought to allay protestors' fears, pointing out that blogs were not considered news portals and do not come under the new rules. Light touch approachMinister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said on Tuesday the government would continue to take a "light touch" approach to regulating the Internet. Eugene Tan, assistant law professor at the Singapore Management University, said that to be more effective, Singapore's blogging community must gain the support of the majority of Singaporeans occupied with bread and butter issues like the high cost of living and immigration. "Otherwise, such protests while exuberant and celebrated by the participants and organisers as standing up to the government, will strike most Singaporeans as being overly self-indulgent," he said. He also said the efficacy of consultations is limited as "the government believes in the utility and virtue of regulation, while the online community is dead against any regulation".