



SIGNS: A banner (left) and a mock grave stone (above) at Hong Lim Park yesterday.

TNP PICTURES: NURJANNAH ZULKIFLI



Blogger Leong Sze Hian

Bloggers stage protest

More than 2,000 gather at Hong Lim Park to oppose new online licensing rules

REPORT: ZUL OTHMAN and
 ZAIHAN MOHAMED YUSOF
 tnp@sph.com.sg

The atmosphere yesterday afternoon was casual and light-hearted.

It seemed as if they came to the park for a festival. People sat where they could find space on the grass.

When musicians performed Bob Marley's Redemption Song, some waved their hands in the air and sang along.

But those in the casually dressed crowd at Hong Lim Park were there for a serious cause – they were supporting the #FreeMyInternet movement and protesting against the new Media Development Authority (MDA) rules.

"I'm here to show my solidarity," said a marketing executive, who gave his name as Jamal, 42. "I don't agree with what's happening. It's wrong on so many levels."

He was one of more than 2,000 people at the peaceful protest at Hong Lim Park.

They listened to 12 bloggers who took the stage to explain why they are against the MDA curbs – which they believe will curtail the freedom of expression.

The importance of a free Internet remains a priority for blogger Leong Sze Hian (leongszehian.com), 59, because his generation "did not dare ask questions".

Mr Leong said a free Internet would facilitate public discourse and get people to ask questions, especially those concerning government policies.

Another blogger who spoke yesterday, Mr Ravi Philemon, 45, of www.raviphilemon.net, said he was encouraged by the turnout.

Said Mr Philemon: "A regulation like this has the ability to impact the kind of news that the people will receive and so that's unhealthy, even for nation-building."

But did the movement resonate with the general public?

Singapore Management University's (SMU) social media expert Michael Netzley said he did not believe it did. "This (latest) issue does not have the reach within the Singapore populace and is not likely to be perceived as something that hits the wallet like earlier issues," said Dr Netzley.

He also thinks what can be labelled "Facebook Activism" will have "little impact beyond awareness".

The #FreeMyInternet movement also organised a blackout – more than 150 blogs either took themselves offline or had a blank screen for 24 hours to protest against the new rules.

Nominated Member of Parliament and SMU law lecturer Eugene Tan sees it differently.

He said: "What we will see is the conscious attempt to impress upon Singaporeans that the new licensing requirements will be detrimental to all."

"Just like the Population White Paper protest, enough people will be moved by the #FreeMyInternet message."

"The Internet, like immigration issues, plays a big role in our lives," said Assistant Professor Tan.

Yesterday, #FreeMyInternet organisers promised they would keep the movement going.

This would be the first of many protests, they told assembled media at a press conference after the scheduled Hong Lim protest ended at 7pm.

Said blogger Elaine Ee from publichouse.sg: "This protest is just the beginning. It's not the climax, it's not the end... It's the start of a sustained campaign for the withdrawal of MDA's licensing regime."

Media consultant P. N. Balji said this

will bring added international attention to Singapore.

"It is likely the people behind the actions want to keep the issue on the boil. Thus the blackout and protest. Also, it brings about an international focus which cannot help Singapore's image," he said.

But beyond creating awareness, will the online and Hong Lim Park protests prove toothless?

Dr Netzley said: "Real world and substantive change does not come from blackouts and Facebook likes."

"A deeper and more substantial mobilisation is required for that kind of change, though social media could play a supporting role in some ways."

Responding to new rules

Under Media Development Authority rules introduced on May 28, news websites will need to apply for an individual licence if they have more than one news story on Singapore per week and attract more than 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore per month, over a period of two months.

These websites would also have to post a \$50,000 performance bond and agree to remove objectionable content within 24 hours when notified.

Some 150 websites and blogs, including The Online Citizen as well as lifestyle and parenting blogs, had signed up for the protest.

The #FreeMyInternet group also launched an online petition for the immediate withdrawal of the licensing scheme, calling on the Ministry of Communications and Information to completely review "all media regulation in Singapore, with the aim of ensuring that the constitutional rights of Singaporeans are not violated".

As of yesterday, the petition had received more than 4,000 signatures.