China Web controversy highlights public role

July 1 2009, By JOE McDONALD , AP Business Writer

Children use computers in a library in Xiangfan in central China's Hubei province Wednesday July 1, 2009. In a rare reversal, China's government gave in to domestic and international pressure and backed down from a rule that would have required personal computers sold in the country to have Internet-filtering software. Just hours before the rule was to have taken effect Wednesday, the government said it would postpone the requirement for the "Green Dam" software. (AP Photo)

(AP) -- Beijing's retreat on its latest Internet-censorship effort highlights the rise of China's increasingly tech-savvy, vocal public as a factor in the authoritarian government's decisions.

China gave in late Tuesday to complaints by Web users, manufacturers and foreign governments and postponed a plan to require producers to supply a government-endorsed filtering software known as Green Dam with every personal computer sold in China.

"We think this is a result of the efforts of all the parties, but we think public opinion played an even more important role than the others," said Edward Yu, president of Analysys International, an Internet research company in Beijing.

The retreat marks another significant shift for a Communist Party that is used to being the final voice in official decisions but is learning to accommodate a public that is growing more assertive as living standards rise.

One of the more vocal campaigners against the filtering software, avant-garde artist Ai Weiwei, threw a party at a Beijing restaurant Wednesday to celebrate. Guests wore T-shirts with slogans cursing Green Dam and the "GFW," or Great Firewall, the nickname of the government's extensive system to monitor and filter Internet traffic.

Ai said he wanted July 1 declared Internet Day as "a reminder that no one should violate the right to free access to the Internet."

Though the Chinese leadership remains as determined as ever to crush challenges to its authority, it also knows that staying in power means keeping in touch with public attitudes and key interest groups.

The government polls relentlessly if quietly. It monitors comments on the Internet from China's nearly 300 million Web users. Sometimes the government alters decisions - like it did with Green Dam.

"This is a milestone in the growing role the broader public has in forming policy decisions," said David Wolf, president of Wolf Group Asia, a technology marketing consultant in Beijing. "The Chinese government is getting very comfortable with listening to voices online and saying, `There's our feedback.'"

Beijing's initial order - made public last month - would have required manufacturers to pre-install or include filtering software with every PC. Authorities said it was needed to protect children from obscene and violent material.

The order, however, threatened to take censorship to a new level of intrusiveness. It touched off an outcry among Internet users, many of whom represent the privileged educated elite. Analysts who examined the software said it also would block political material the government dislikes.

In announcing the delay of its order, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology did not say whether Green Dam might be revived at a later date.

In celebrating, some Web activists warned the victory was temporary.

"It's not as if they have dropped their censorship program but I do think it will be much harder for them to roll out Green Dam now because over this past half-year censorship and fighting censorship have become part of youth consciousness," said Zuo La, 28, a blogger from the southern city of Changsha who uses the online name Zola.

"Even some middle and high school students know about censorship now and are really annoyed by the controls," Zuo said.

Industry analysts expect Beijing may try to mollify users by developing a less obvious system.

"They certainly will not give up on the effort to filter the Internet," said Duncan Clark, chairman of BDA China Ltd., a Beijing technology research firm. "But they're sensitive to mass disquiet."

Aside from not considering the public reaction, Beijing bungled the Green Dam roll-out by rushing the software into service and failing to give adequate notice to computer-makers.

"The response of the public in China was a clear indication that somebody didn't do their homework," James Zimmerman, a partner in Beijing for the law firm Squire Sanders & Dempsey, said in an e-mail. "The government knows that voices of discontent are alive and well in China, and the government needs to do a better job at harnessing these voices rather than ignoring them during the rule-making process."

The Internet's role in publicizing complaints and focusing government attention has been gaining momentum.

A waitress who was accused of fatally stabbing a party official to fend off his demands for sex became a folk hero after a flood of supportive postings appeared online. Last month, a court convicted the 21-year-old woman, Deng Yujiao, but spared her punishment in an apparent effort to mollify the public.

Green Dam was announced amid a series of official efforts to tighten Internet controls ahead of the politically sensitive 60th anniversary in October of the 1949 founding of the communist government.

Earlier this year, Web sites were ordered to review their content to make sure they had no pornographic or politically unpalatable material.

The government also has scrapped or modified technology regulations after complaints by industry and China's trading partners.

In April, the government said it was postponing for a year a requirement for foreign suppliers of computer security technology to reveal how their products work. That came after industry groups and the U.S. government

objected.

Associated Press Writer Alexa Olesen in Beijing contributed to this report.

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