

Thailand censors more websites as protests persist

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Residents walk past rows of razor wire in downtown Bangkok, Thailand Saturday, May 8, 2010. New violence erupted overnight in the Thai capital, killing a policeman and marring tentative progress to resolving a sometimes bloody tow-month standoff between the government and protestors seeking new elections. Anti-government demonstrators say they agree in principle with a proposal by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections. (AP Photo./David Longstreath)

(AP) -- George Orwell's "1984" had its Big Brother, and Thailand has Ranongrak Suwanchawee. The country's information minister stares down from billboards along Bangkok's expressways, warning that "Bad websites are detrimental to society" and should be reported to a special hot line.

The government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is fighting a battle on at least two major fronts against protesters seeking its ouster. On the streets, a massive force of soldiers and police has only managed to battle them to a standstill. In cyberspace, the authorities have fared little better, despite efforts to block dissenting voices with the threat of lengthy prison terms.

Still, it is a struggle for uncensored information to get through, forcing both information providers and consumers to resort to various dodges to penetrate the government's firewall, sometimes using tactics perfected by dissidents in such authoritarian states as China and Iran.

The often broad-brush approach to blocking websites even affects surfers just out for some video fun: Live streaming services justin.tv, ustream.tv and livestream.tv have also been blocked, apparently because they host transmissions by the so-called Red Shirt protesters.

"Thailand is getting increasingly like China when it comes to [Internet censorship](#)," said Poomjit Sirawongprasert, president of the Thai Hosting Service Providers Club.

All the while, Thailand's freedom of speech reputation takes a battering. Thailand's standing in the Press Freedom Index of the Paris-based group Reporters Without Borders slipped to 130 last year from 65 in 2002, when the ratings were initiated.

The latest crisis in Thailand's past five years of political turmoil has pushed the government into tightening already tough controls over the Internet. The Red Shirts want Abhisit to dissolve Parliament and call early elections, claiming he came to power illegitimately in December 2007 with the help of back-room deals and military pressure.

The demonstrators have been camped out on Bangkok's streets for

almost two months, during which time protest-related violence has left 29 people dead and almost 1,000 hurt.

On April 7, when the government realized the demonstrators were here to stay, it declared a state of emergency, barring the media, under threat of a ban or censorship, from disseminating any news that "causes panic, instigates violence or affects stability."

Immediately it ordered 36 politically oriented websites blocked. It also went after small radio stations that are a key organizing tools for the Red Shirts, as well as their satellite TV connection. Their print media so far has been left alone. And although the order is meant to crack down on inflammatory sites, none belonging to the Red Shirts' ideological opponents - the royalist Yellow Shirts, whose sites also sometimes contain extremist content - are known to have been targeted.

"Nobody has come out to explain why the websites are blocked, starting with 36, then 190 and later 420," said Supinya Klangnarong, coordinator of the Thai Netizen Network, which promotes freedom of speech on the Internet. She says the actual figure is probably much higher, since there are unofficial ways, such as pressure on Internet service providers, to block sites.

Web censorship has been going on for years in Thailand. Reporters Without Borders says that cumulatively, over the past few years, more than 50,000 websites or individual pages have been blocked.

In fact, the government openly touts its crackdowns on sites that contain content seen in [Thailand](#) as immoral - including those related to pornography and gambling - and there has been little public outcry. But increasingly the censorship is spreading into news and politics.

The big chill began after a military coup deposed former Prime Minister

Thaksin Shinawatra in September 2006, following demonstrations calling on him to step down for alleged corruption and abuse of power. He was also accused of Thailand's biggest political sin: disrespect for the country's esteemed constitutional monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, now 82.

Thaksin, a billionaire who made his fortune in telecommunications, was no friend of free speech either, putting political and financial pressure to limit negative reporting from outlets he did not control. But after his ouster, there was a concerted push by those in power to "protect the monarchy" - going so far as to block all of YouTube for several months because of a few videos it hosted that were deemed insulting to the king.

The interim military-installed regime enacted the 2007 Computer Crime Act, which bars the circulation of material deemed detrimental to national security or that causes public panic, and authorities have used it to block thousands of sites.

This is often done quietly and many Internet users will see only an error message when they try to visit a blocked page.

Websites that serve as mouthpieces for the Red Shirts have been the main targets of government censorship lately. But another one of those first 36 ordered shut after the declaration of the state of emergency was Prachatai.com, which was established by several respected journalists, senators and press freedom activists. It describes itself as an independent, nonprofit, daily Web newspaper that provides information "during an era of serious curbs on the freedom and independence of Thai news media."

"The attempt to control the Internet has become very great, even greater than after the coup took place in 2006. But then again, Internet communication has played a bigger role since then," said Prachatai's

webmaster, Chiranuch Premchaiporn.

Chiranuch was already facing charges of violating the Computer Crime Act by allowing comments "threatening to national security" to be posted on her site. She could receive up to 50 years in prison for the multiple charges against her.

Prachatai, like others, is playing a cat-and-mouse game with censors, moving servers out of the country and finding other ways to get its news out.

"If they keep blocking, eventually we might have to distribute content via e-mail," Chiranuch said.

Users also can circumvent blocking, most typically by using proxy servers, which allow them to connect through a third party computer to disguise their intended destination, and sometimes even software developed to get past firewalls set up by more notorious censors such as China and Iran.

Chiranuch said censorship is not the answer to Thailand's divisions.

"From personal observation, the political crisis intensified after media were suppressed," she said. "The government is looking down on the people. If it believes people in the country are intelligent and smart enough, showing respect by allowing them to consume news and information from all sides is better than blocking them."

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