

US criticizes Vietnam new Internet control decree

August 6 2013, by Chris Brummitt

(AP)—The United States joined global Internet giants Google and Facebook on Tuesday in criticizing a new decree in Vietnam that further curbs online free speech and forces foreign companies to keep servers inside the country.

The Internet has emerged as a major avenue of dissent in Vietnam, alarming conservative elements in the Communist government. Authorities want to stifle dissent, but must balance this with the reality that a free Internet is important to maintaining economic growth and attracting investment.

It issued Decree 72 last month, prohibiting the posting of material that "opposes" the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and "harms national security" and other vague terms. The decree cements an ongoing crackdown: Many of the 46 people convicted this year under other laws banning dissent were bloggers.

U.S. officials in Hanoi, as well as large multinational Internet companies, lobbied the government during the drafting process. Some of the more draconian elements were dropped, but the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi made it clear that it was disappointed with the final version.

"Fundamental freedoms apply online just as they do offline," the embassy said in a statement. "We are deeply concerned by the decree's provisions that appear to limit the types of information individuals can share via personal social media accounts and on websites."

Google and other Internet companies have been seeking to expand their business in Vietnam, which has a rapidly growing Internet sector, but are wary about having to cooperate with censorship requests and give up users' personal information to authorities.

The decree stipulates that foreign companies have to keep at least server inside the country, a move that gives the government some control over their activities. But this increases costs for multinational seeking to expand in Asia, effectively functioning as barrier to enter the market.

"We believe that the decree will negatively affect Vietnam's Internet ecosystem," said the Asia Internet Coalition, an industry grouping representing Google, Facebook and other Internet companies. "In the long term, the decree will stifle innovation and discourage businesses from operating in Vietnam."

It remains to be seen how much of the decree, which comes into effect on September 1, will be enforced.

Google and Facebook are currently the dominant players in the search and social sectors of the Internet market in Vietnam. They don't have offices inside the country, but are able to market their products. The government wasn't immediately available for comment.

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Citation: US criticizes Vietnam new Internet control decree (2013, August 6) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-08-criticizes-vietnam-internet-decree.html>

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