

Thai Facebook users get censorship scare

May 28 2014, by Grant Peck

Thailand's new military rulers said that a sudden interruption of access to Facebook on Wednesday was not part of a censorship policy, but due instead to a technical hitch.

The afternoon blockage did not affect all users but drew a flurry of attention online. It lasted for at least an hour and came just a day after the new military government announced an Internet crackdown. The junta has banned dissemination of information that could cause unrest, effectively banning criticism of last week's coup.

A statement from the junta, called the National Council for Peace and Order, declared that "there is no policy to suspend or close down Facebook."

It said an inspection found that there was a "technical error" at the telecommunications gateway that connects Internet service providers to international circuits, and it had ordered the problem fixed.

Deputy army spokesman Col. Winthai Suvaree later came on television to offer the same explanation and announce that the problem had been corrected. All television stations must broadcast official announcements from the junta, which seized power May 22 in what it said was a bid to end more than six months of sometimes violent political disorder. Newspapers and TV and radio stations are exercising self-censorship.

On Tuesday, the government's Ministry of Information and Communication Technology told the Thai press that a new national

gateway was being planned to filter the Internet more effectively, and that [social media](#) was being monitored closely for violations of the new censorship rules.

Thanit Prapatanan, director of the ministry's Office of Technology Communications Crime Prevention and Suppression, said Wednesday that his office has shut down at least 330 websites since the junta's censorship orders came out, but he denied shutting down Facebook in Thailand.

"We're blocking access to webpages that could incite chaos, instigate violence or division or pose a threat to national security. We are looking at the individual pages. For example, on Facebook, we only look for such posts, not looking to shut down Facebook in Thailand as a whole. But if there are any pages that violate the order, we will definitely block it."

Before the interruption, a junta spokesman also said services such as Facebook would not be targeted for shutdown, but individuals would be investigated.

"People put hate speech in social media and create confusion and division in society," Col. Weerachon Sukhondhapatipak said at a news conference.

Even under elected leadership, Thailand has exercised unusual control over the Internet, blocking thousands of web pages containing pornography or material deemed insulting to the nation's royal family. Criticism of the monarchy—online or elsewhere—is a crime punishable up to 15 years in jail.

Several years ago, the government reached an agreement with YouTube that allowed it to block selected pages to viewers in Thailand. The

government and the army also maintain teams of watchers to monitor web boards and other sites for inappropriate content.

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