Singapore moves to regulate taxi booking apps

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A smartphone displays the Uber app of the timing and availability of taxis within the area at Raffles place financial district in Singapore, on October 10, 2014

Singapore on Friday announced new rules for mobile taxi booking apps, including US-based Uber, in the latest move by governments around the world to regulate the increasingly popular services.

Taxi-booking and ride-sharing apps like Uber, Hailo and Lyft have

spread rapidly in recent years, drawing protests from cabbies in cities from London to San Francisco who say it has led to soaring competition from unlicensed drivers.

Singapore's Land Transport Authority said the apps will have to apply for a three-yearly "certificate of registration" starting from the second quarter of next year.

"Third-party taxi booking services facilitate more efficient matching of taxis with commuters and have become increasingly popular," the LTA said, adding the new rules are designed to "safeguard commuter safety and interests".

Apps operating in Singapore will need to agree to despatch only licensed taxis and drivers, while information on fare rates and other fees payable for a ride must be disclosed to passengers.

The apps will be barred from requiring passengers to disclose their destinations when they make bookings due to concerns some taxi drivers may try to avoid certain routes, the LTA said.

Operators are also required to provide "basic customer support", including lost and found services and a platform for customers to file complaints.

Passengers in Singapore can only use Uber to connect to registered taxis and limousines, unlike in some other cities around the world where the app is used to hire private cars and ride-share to cut fares.

A commuter boards a taxi at Raffles place financial district in Singapore, on October 10, 2014

Other similar apps operating in Singapore include Britain's Hailo, regional player Easy Taxi and Malaysia-based GrabTaxi.

At present, these apps already comply with Singapore's new requirement for the taxis to be licensed.

Michael Brown, Uber's Southeast Asia general manager based in Singapore, on Friday welcomed the new rules.

"We appreciate that the LTA has acknowledged the benefits our technology brings, and like Uber, is putting the interest and safety of consumers and drivers first," Brown said in a statement to AFP.

Uber has been battling scandal in recent days, scrambling to allay fears

that its employees have spied on passengers through a "God View" feature that shows where riders are located at any given time.

Emil Michael, Uber's executive vice president of business, also sparked anger by outlining a vision of spending $1 million on digging up dirt on journalists critical of the start-up.

Michael apologised for the comments and stressed neither he nor Uber would ever actually resort to the kind of tactic he suggested.

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