

Vietnamese leader says banning social media sites impossible

January 15 2015

Vietnam's prime minister said Thursday that it is impossible to ban social media such as Facebook so authorities in the communist nation instead should provide correct information to inform public opinion.

"You are all on social media, checking Facebook for information. What should be done to have correct information?" Nguyen Tan Dung told officials in his office, according to a report on the website of the state-run newspaper Thanh Nien, or Young People. "It's impossible for us to ban it."

Along with political activities, the ruling communist party also tightly controls the media in Vietnam, making independent information found on the Internet popular. Dung's comments came at a time when rumors of corruption involving some top officials are rife on some social media and as the party is preparing for its five-year congress scheduled for early 2016.

Dung advised his colleagues that the government "must give correct and timely information to guide opinion. Regardless of what is being said on the Internet, people will believe when there is official information from the government."

Social media like Facebook are hugely popular in Vietnam, where more than a third of the population of 90 million is online.

Facebook users have complained in the past about having difficulties

accessing the site, but the government denies that it has tried to block it, though it has tried to block other sites. In 2013, according to some critics and Internet analysts, evidence surface that a shadowy, pro-government cyber army was blocking, hacking and spying on Vietnamese activists around the world to hamper the country's pro-democracy movement.

Scores of Internet users and government critics, including those with Facebook accounts, have in the past few years been arrested on national security grounds, such as for posting "online articles with bad content and false information that discredit and create distrust among people about state agencies, social agencies and citizens." At least three bloggers have been arrested in the past month-and-a-half.

Western nations and international human rights groups have accused Vietnam of jailing people for peacefully expressing their views, but Hanoi says only those who violate laws are put behind bars. The state convicted at least 63 bloggers and other nonviolent democracy activists in 2013 of criminal offenses, according to New York-based Human Rights Watch.

"Vietnam's arrests of more bloggers for allegedly abusing 'democratic freedoms' is a cynical and chilling move," Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch, said last year. He has called for Vietnam to drop charges against bloggers and to scrap laws used to quash free expression.

One law bans the sharing of news and content critical of the government on social media, but prosecutions are usually carried out under the rubric of national security.

"The government should recognize it cannot drag the Vietnamese people by force back into a pre-Internet world where state controlled media was completely dominant," Robertson said.

Other Southeast Asian nations are also seeking to curb speech on social media, most notably Thailand, where laws ban criticism of the monarchy and the circulation of material deemed detrimental to national security or that causes panic. Since a coup last year, Thailand's military-installed government stepped up efforts to monitor online content.

Last month, Thai police announced that they could monitor the popular text messaging system LINE, an assertion denied by the Japan-based company.

Takorn Tantasith, secretary general of Thailand's National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, said at the time he had asked representatives of Internet service providers and social media sites such as Facebook to help monitor and suppress content that might insult the monarchy. Thai law already allows prosecution of network administrators who don't remove offensive content in a timely fashion, even when posted by third parties.

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Citation: Vietnamese leader says banning social media sites impossible (2015, January 15)
retrieved 7 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-01-vietnamese-leader-social-media-sites.html>

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