

Facebook tells Thai users their data not given to government

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Facebook is seeking to reassure Thai users that it safeguards their private data, after a series of arrests raised concerns the social network had failed to protect personal information from Thailand's military government.

A statement by Facebook's Asia-Pacific spokeswoman, Charlene Chian, said the company has not given any account information to the Thai government and its systems remain secure. It said it publicly lists government requests for data or blocking sites and responds according to law.

"Facebook uses advanced systems to keep people's information secure and tools to keep their accounts safe, and we do not provide any government with direct access to people's data," said the statement, received Wednesday by email.

Thailand's junta, which came to power in May 2014 after overthrowing an elected government, tries to tightly control dissent. Its guidelines for discussing an August referendum on a draft constitution make it virtually impossible to campaign for rejecting the draft without risking up to 10 years in jail.

The junta has also vigorously enforced a long-standing law against defaming the monarchy, which is punishable by three to 15 years imprisonment. Most prosecutions involve material posted on the Internet, and the cases are tried by a military court.

Late last month the authorities arrested eight people on charges of sedition and violation of the Computer Crime Act for material posted on Facebook that mocked Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha. Two also face charges on the more serious offense of defaming the monarchy. Evidence shown to some suspects reportedly indicated that police accessed some of their private messages. Police have not clarified the matter.

According to New York-based Human Rights Watch, the military government has charged at least 46 people with sedition, and the latest cases "are part of the junta's systematic repression of peaceful dissent and criticism" since the 2014 coup.

"Slapping people with sedition charges for political satire on Facebook shows that no political discussion is safe in Thailand anymore," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Thai authorities, , who previously declared that clicking "Like" on a potentially illegal Facebook post could be cause for arrest, last week charged a dissident's mother for failing to rebut a Facebook message that allegedly defamed the royal family.

Users were also disturbed that Facebook recently blocked a site that allegedly mocked the monarchy, the first time it appears to have done so in Thailand. The page redirects to an announcement that it is blocked to comply with Thai law. In response to the Facebook issues, several activists have started a campaign to stop using the huge social network in favor of a competitor.

User concerns that their online privacy has been infringed, whether justified or not, have affected other online services as well. Worries that the LINE messaging service could be monitored caused some users to switch to Telegram and other competitors.

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