

Singapore passes 'fake news' law despite fierce criticism

May 8 2019, by Martin Abbugao



The new measures to combat "fake news" were debated for two days in parliament before being passed

Singapore's parliament Wednesday passed laws to combat "fake news" that will allow authorities to order the removal of online content despite

fierce criticism from tech giants and rights groups.

They give [government](#) ministers powers to order [social media sites](#) like Facebook and Twitter to put warnings next to posts authorities deem to be false, and in extreme cases get them taken down.

If an action is judged to be malicious and damaging to Singapore's interests, companies could be hit with fines of up to Sg\$1 million (\$735,000).

Individuals could face jail terms of up to 10 years.

Authorities in the tightly-controlled country—long criticised for restricting [civil liberties](#)—insist the measures are necessary to stop the circulation of falsehoods which could sow divisions in society and erode trust in institutions.

But the laws have sparked outrage from rights groups, who fear they could stifle online discussion, [tech companies](#) with major bases in the financial hub and journalists' organisations.

The legislation "gives the Singapore authorities unchecked powers to clamp down on online views of which it disapproves," said Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International's regional director for East and Southeast Asia.

"It criminalises free speech and allows the government almost unfettered power to censor dissent. It doesn't even provide any real definition of what is true or false or, even more worrying, 'misleading.'"

'Far-reaching legislation'

The measures were debated for two days in parliament, which is

dominated by the ruling People's Action Party, before being passed late Wednesday.

The city-state's small opposition Workers' Party—with only six elected members in the 89-seat chamber—opposed the measures.

"To introduce such a bill is not what the government, which claims to defend democracy and public interest, should do," said one of the party's MPs, Low Thia Khiang.

"It is more like the actions of a dictatorial government that will resort to any means to hold on to absolute power."

The Asia Internet Coalition, an industry association whose members include Facebook, Google and Twitter, has described it as the "most far-reaching legislation of its kind to date".

But addressing parliament Tuesday, law and home affairs minister K. Shanmugam said that tech companies could not be relied upon to regulate themselves.

"This is serious business. Tech companies will say many things to try and advocate their position," he said. "We have to show them we are fair, but also firm."

The government stresses the laws target [false statements](#), not opinions, and that ordering "corrections" to be placed alongside falsehoods will be the primary response rather than fines or jail terms.

Any government decision can be appealed to the courts—although critics say there are few people who would have the resources or will to take on the authorities.

Critics also note that Singapore already has tough legislation against sedition, defamation and disturbing racial harmony, that can be used to police the web.

The internet has up until now been a relatively free space in Singapore and there are some local alternative news sites, which are typically more critical of the authorities than the traditional, pro-government newspapers and TV.

The financial hub of 5.6 million people is among several countries which have passed laws against [fake news](#).

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