Thai junta passes controversial cyber-crime law

Thailand's rubber-stamp parliament on Friday passed a controversial cyber-crime law that critics say strengthens the junta's ability to police the web and squeeze out criticism.

Free expression has been severely cramped since the generals seized power in 2014.

The junta has banned protests, muzzled the press, blocked scores of websites and used already stringent cyber and defamation laws to prosecute critics over everything from Facebook comments to investigative reports on rights abuses.

Despite strong public criticism, the junta-appointed parliament on Friday voted to unanimously pass an updated version of the Computer Crimes Act, with 167 yes votes and five abstentions.

"I can reassure that this law is important and necessary but will absolutely not violate personal rights," said lawmaker Chatchawal Suksomjit, a former top cop who drove through the bill.

Thailand's new king Maha Vajiralongkorn will have to sign it off before it becomes law.

The government has said the law needed to be modernised.

But rights groups warn that the revised version is even more vaguely-worded than its predecessor, broadening the scope of the government's surveillance and censorship powers.

It allots up to five years in prison for entering "false information into a computer system that jeopardises national security, public safety, national economic stability or public infrastructure, or causes panic", according to a version of the law provided by Thai Netizen Network, an internet freedom advocacy group.

One of the most controversial additions is the creation of a five-person committee that can seek court approval to remove online content considered a breach of "public morals".

"The definition (of this term) is not written in any law, it is just up to the committee," said Arthit Suriyawongkul of the Thai Netizen Network, which helped collect more than 300,000 signatures opposing the bill.

"It's going to be very difficult for people to know what they can and cannot say. It could also be very inconsistent from one government to another," he added.

Another new clause empowers authorities to request user and traffic data from internet service providers without a court warrant, raising privacy concerns.

Prosecutions under both the Computer Crime Act and Thailand's tough royal defamation law have skyrocketed since the junta's power grab, often netting social media users.
According to watchdog Fortify Rights, there have been at least 399 prosecutions under the computer law in 2016 compared to 46 in 2013, the year before the junta grabbed power.

© 2016 AFP

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.