



The Citizen Lab

Southeast Asia CyberWatch: July 2012

A monthly report on trends in online censorship, information operations,
and Internet use in Southeast Asia

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MALAYSIA

Blogger Syed Abdullah detained over posting

Syed Abdullah Syed Husein, who blogs under the name “Uncle Seekers”, was [arrested](#) under the [Official Secrets Act](#) [pdf] for defaming the Sultan of Johor in more than 30 blog postings. His arrest occurred after police reports were lodged against him by those [linked to](#) the United Malays National Organisation, the prime minister’s party. They [claimed](#) [Malaysian] that the postings were a “provocation, incitement, and insult to the Sultan”. The allegations were then associated with the Official Secrets Act, which [grants the government](#) [pdf] with “extensive powers to intrude in and interfere with private speech”.

Malaysia to repeal sedition law curbing free speech

Prime Minister Najib Razak has [announced](#) plans to repeal the 1948 law that has curbed free speech and freedom of expression in Malaysia, known as the [Sedition Act](#) [pdf], in the latest political reform

before general elections. The 64-year-old law will be [replaced with](#) a National Harmony Act, which the government say is intended to preserve the right to freedom of speech while protecting national unity. Razak has instructed Attorney General Abdul Gani Patail to hold public consultations before the new legislation is put together. [Human rights activists](#) and the [opposition](#), however, are skeptical about the new law and demand for the government to make its drafting process open and transparent. Zulkifli Anwar Ulhaque's [recent arrest](#), otherwise known as Zunar, who uses political cartoons to highlight government's failings and as a result, was detained for sedition, is illustrative of why the draconian Act needs to be revoked.

MYANMAR

Government moves to reform the country's telecommunications sector

The next step on Burma's path to democracy appears to be reforming the country's telecommunications policy. Due to poor infrastructure, prohibitively high costs, and tight government control, [estimates](#) say that 96 percent of the country's 60 million people lack access to Internet and telephone services. Censorship of the Internet and print media has also been extremely pervasive, and the government routinely arrests journalists, bloggers, and netizens. The government, however, has taken steps to ease this control, including [lifting restrictions](#) on 30,000 websites in September 2011, which has allowed citizens to view content that was previously prohibited, including political content. The Ministry of Communications says it is now liberalizing communications networks with a goal of increasing mobile penetration by 50 percent by 2015, providing more Burmese people access to the Internet, and [encouraging foreign investment](#) in the country. Information Minister Kyaw Hsan has also announced that a new media law is being drafted that will abolish censorship in favour of a self-regulating press council.

The country has been praised for its reforms to date, including the release of many political prisoners. If it continues along this path, [Reporters Without Borders](#) (RSF) has stated that it will remove the country from its list of "Enemies of the Internet". The phrase "cautious optimism" is often used to describe Burma, however, as many political prisoners remain in prison, and censorship and surveillance of the Internet are not yet a thing of the past.

SINGAPORE

Blogger asked to apologize for court criticism

Blogger Alex Au was [ordered](#) by Singaporean authorities to publish a letter of apology and erase an offending blog post, titled "[Woffles Wu case hits a nerve](#)", within the week or face legal action. In the post, he implied that Wu was treated favorably by the courts. Dr. Wu, a prominent 52-year-old plastic surgeon was fined S\$1,000 last month for getting an elderly employee to take the rap for him for a speeding offence. The Attorney-General's Chambers [said](#) that the June 18 post "alleged that the Singapore courts are biased towards those whom the author, Mr Au Waipang, described as well-connected". Subsequently, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Yaacob Ibrahim said that the government has no plans to clamp down on the Internet. Nevertheless, for months now

Ibrahim has been encouraging the online community to come up with a [code of conduct](#) on “responsible online behavior” and maintained that “Whatever you do in the online space must reflect what you do in the real world.”

Media Literary Council to monitor online behaviour

Bloggers, government officials, academics, journalists and social-media practitioners met in a [closed-door discussion](#) over the creation of a code of conduct on responsible online behavior in April. Several of them had said “no” to the code as they were concerned that it would provide a mechanism for the government to restrict free speech online. The government, however, has taken a step further toward the achievement of this goal by [establishing](#) a 21-member Media Literary Council to “to spearhead public education on media literacy and cyber wellness”. Internet users in Singapore, however, are expressing doubt about the role of the council. Some are [concerned](#), for instance, that the council will spend its time “telling us what we can or cannot say and do online.”

THAILAND

King pardons US citizen charged under lèse-majesté laws

A Thai-born U.S citizen, Lerpong Wichaikhammat (more commonly known by his American name, Joe Gordon), was [pardoned](#) by King Bhumibol Adulyadej on July 9. In December, Gordon was found guilty of defaming the king under Thailand’s archaic lèse-majesté laws, and was serving a two and a half year jail term. He had been [charged](#) for translating parts of an unauthorized biography of the Thai King by Paul Handley called *The King Never Smiles*, and posting links that allowed it to be downloaded. The book is banned in Thailand because of “contents which could affect national security and the good morality of the people”. Gordon’s is one of many recent cases that have drawn [international attention](#) to the use of lèse-majesté law to restrict freedom of expression online. [Southeast Asia Cyber Watch](#) previously reported on the case of Chiranuch Premchaiporn, who was sentenced in May to a one-year suspended prison term for failing to promptly remove comments that defame the royal family on the forum that she moderated.

VIETNAM

Blogger detained

Blogger and rights activist, Huynh Thuc Vy, was briefly [detained](#) on July 6 and faces charges and harsh penalties under Article 79 for her allegedly “anti-state” activities. Huynh’s house in Ho Chi Minh City was also raided, and police confiscated two laptops and mobile telephones. It is not clear whether the charges against her relate to her blogging or protest activities. Vietnamese authorities have [targeted and harassed](#) Huynh since she began writing about human rights issues in 2008. She has been subjected to hefty fines, arbitrary detention and police raids of her home.

Imprisoned blogger’s moth self-immolates in protest

The mother of prominent Vietnamese blogger, Ta Phong Tan, set herself on fire on July 30 to [protest](#) her daughter's detention on charges of anti-state propaganda. Ta Phong Tan, a former police

officer, was [arrested](#) in September 2011 and charged with anti-state propaganda in April 2012 for documenting corruption and injustice on her blog and on a now-banned website, the "Free Journalists' Club". She faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted. Her mother's [self-immolation](#) occurred outside of a local government office in Bac Lieu province in the Mekong Delta. She succumbed to her injuries on route to the hospital.

Clinton urges Vietnam to respect freedom of expression online

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton [criticized](#) Vietnam's human rights record on her recent trip to the region. She was particularly critical of the regime's crackdown on freedom of expression online, and the arrests of prominent bloggers, journalists and activists. She gave no indication, however, that improving human rights was a prerequisite for strengthening relations between the two countries. "The United States will continue to urge Vietnam to strengthen its commitment to human rights and give its people a greater say over the direction of their lives," [she said](#). "But our relationship is not fixed upon our differences. We have learned to see each other not as former enemies, but as friends."

Baidu infects Vietnamese computers

The Vietnamese version of Baidu, a Chinese search engine company, is [infecting computers](#) with spyware and adware. The Vietnamese hackers' community (HVA) in cooperation with CMC InfoSec, [claim](#) that once the malicious software has been downloaded, the attackers can control the compromised computers remotely, extract data, and use them as zombies to participate in distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks.

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