The Citizen Lab

Southeast Asia CyberWatch: March 2013

A monthly report on trends in online censorship, information operations,

and Internet use in Southeast Asia

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CAMBODIA

Cambodia reports increased Internet penetration
Cambodia has reported a 60 percent rise in Internet users since last year, with a total of 2.7 million Cambodians online as of December 2012. Secretary of State Sarak Khan and Minister of Posts and Telecommunication So Khun both cited "expanded internet infrastructure and growing knowledge on Internet usage" as reasons for the significant increase. However, the spread of information communications technologies and social media may come at a cost for the government, as its citizens have been known to use the Internet as a platform to voice dissenting opinions.

INDONESIA

Indonesia to host Internet Governance Forum
Indonesia will host the 2013 Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Bali in October. The conference will be attended by international government officials, representatives from civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to discuss governance issues related to the Internet. Representatives from Indonesia's telecommunications and Internet sector have said they want to use the meeting as a forum to voice their opposition to legislation they see as inhibiting ICT growth in the country. Civil society organizations also want to use the IGF meeting to focus on human rights issues, especially regarding content filtering and the prosecution of Indonesian citizens for comments made online.

MALAYSIA

Researchers say importance of social media in upcoming elections exaggerated
Ahead of the 2013 General Elections, both major political coalitions — Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat — have relied heavily on social media and web portals to spread their message to voters. Malaysia's Internet penetration is above 60 percent, while almost half of the country's population of 29 million people use Facebook. However, researchers at Universiti Utara Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia have cautioned that social media has had only a limited impact on campaigns. These researchers state that online campaigns have failed to capture the still-powerful rural vote, where Internet access is lacking and face-to-face campaigning remains the most effective tactic. Potential voters are also more likely to express skepticism or otherwise ignore social media-based advertisements and political messages.

Government announces free Internet access for the poor
Prime Minister Najib Razak recently announced that families earning less than RM$3,000 per month (US$963.39) would receive free Internet for the first 30 minutes of usage each day beginning next month. The government will use an existing database of people registered under the "1Malaysia People's Aid" program and will ask telecommunications companies to comply with the directive. The initiative aims to further "contribute to the country's growing digital penetration."

MYANMAR

Government creates commission to search for identity of blogger
Posts written by someone identified only as "Dr. Seik Phwar" have led Myanmar's parliament to create a commission tasked specifically with finding out the blogger's real identity. The blogger has openly criticized Myanmar's new government and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi repeatedly online. The commission has met in March, although no further information has been uncovered despite talks with local media figures to find clues as to Dr. Phwar's real identity.

Google Executive Chairman promotes Internet freedom in Myanmar

This month, Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google Inc., visited Myanmar in an effort to promote Internet freedom. In a speech to university students in Yangon, Schmidt urged the government to allow for the creation of new businesses and an unregulated Internet environment. Schmidt also promoted an open Internet as a vehicle for greater political freedom. In January, Schmidt visited North Korea to promote the value of a free Internet..

Twitter used to bring attention to anti-Rohingya violence

Violence against Myanmar's Rohingya population became a trending topic on Twitter in late March due to the efforts of the "hacktivist" group Anonymous. Hashtags #OpRohingya and #RohingyaNOW were first mentioned on Anonymous' various Twitter account and spread through the social media platform. On March 25, #RohingyaNOW was Twitter's top trending hashtag. Threats against Myanmar's Muslim populations have resulted in 125,000 displaced people since June 2012.

PHILIPPINES

President's website "hacked"

In March, Anonymous Philippines hacked the website of the Office of the President for what they claim is the presidency's "mishandling" of the Sabah conflict. A message by the group accused the government of allowing Malaysian troops to kill Filipino citizens. Malaysia's Sabah state on the island of Borneo has been claimed by members of the self-described Royal Sulu Sultanate Army who wish to revive the defunct Sultanate of Sulu, which had ruled over parts of north Borneo in the past. Armed men representing the Army invaded and occupied a village near the city of Lahad Datu, creating an ongoing standoff between the militants and Malaysian security forces.

Filipino police create new Anti-Cybercrime Group

The Philippine National Police have formed a new support unit, the Anti-Cybercrime Group, following the directives contained in the Cybercrime Prevention Act, despite a temporary restraining order (TRO) being placed on the enactment of the law by the Supreme Court. The group will be responsible for curtailing "cybercrime offenses, computer-related offenses, and other content-related offenses." As previously reported, the Cybercrime Prevention Act has been met with considerable opposition from a variety of legal experts and civil society groups in the country.

SINGAPORE

Deputy Prime Minister outlines approach to safety and security

On March 7, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Teo Chee Hean, outlined the country's approach to safety and security in front of the Singaporean Parliament, highlighting the problems of "terrorism and cyber-security" in particular. He maintained that the persistent threat of terrorism has been intensified by groups' "use of social media to spread propaganda and recruit new radicals." Teo cited the case of Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader as an example of how social media facilitates

youth "self-radicalization." Furthermore, Teo announced that Singapore will continue to bolster its defenses against cyberattacks, cyberespionage, and cybercrime. As part of this initiative, the government will establish a Cyber Security Lab by 2014, which will allow security officers to better prevent, detect, and respond to threats to "critical information infrastructure." Notably, the Computer Misuse and Cybersecurity Act was amended last month to permit the Ministry of Home Affairs to take preemptive and proactive measures against cyber threats.

THAILAND

Televised debate on *lèse majesté*

A Thai talk show has raised controversy by holding a debate on *lèse majesté* laws in the country. This five-part series of debates between historians, state officials, and pro- and anti-monarchists has been criticized by supporters of the monarchy. The last episode of the debate has not been aired, after pro-monarchists protested in front of the offices of the Thailand Public Broadcasting Service (TPBS), sparking fears from studio executives that the show could create social strife. As previously reported, criticizing the monarchy online has led to the arrests of scores of bloggers and Internet users in the past.

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VIETNAM

Activists urge Vietnam to release imprisoned dissidents

On March 8, campaigners from Vietnam and the International Federation of Human Rights petitioned the UN Human Rights Council to pressure the Vietnamese government into releasing dozens of jailed online activists. Political activist Vo Van Ai, a representative of the group, argued that the Vietnamese government's harsh measures have served only to stifle freedom of speech and condemned the use of national security laws to detain bloggers without due process. Two weeks later, the Obama administration publicly criticized Vietnam for "backsliding on human rights" through its crackdown on bloggers. As previously reported, the government has recently intensified online censorship and restrictions. Currently, there are 32 bloggers and netizens in detention [PDF] in Vietnam.

Government continues crackdown on bloggers

Earlier this month Nguyen Dac Kien, a journalist for the Family and Society newspaper, was reprimanded and fired by his employer for a blog post in which he criticized Nguyen Phu Trong, the general-secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The newspaper explained that Kien's post had "violated the operating rules" and noted that he would be "held accountable before the law for his words and behavior." Around the same time, Radio Free Asia reported that Vietnamese authorities have repeatedly harassed the family of dissident Huynh Ngoc Tuan. His children include Huynh Thuc Vy, a blogger and online activist, who has been detained multiple times. Local police have conducted several "'temporary resident' checks" on the family, one of which followed immediately after a blog post detailing the harassment. Authorities have also raided their homes and confiscated computer equipment.

Online social network for youth coming soon

Vietnam has announced that it will launch a social network specifically geared toward the country's youth, who are the largest demographic of Internet users. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung mentioned the initiative in front of the Central Committee of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in Hanoi.

Read previous editions of the Southeast Asia CyberWatch.