

Malaysia to review law after web 'blackout' protest

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA: Malaysia's prime minister said he would review a legal amendment that critics claim threatens free expression online after they staged a one-day "Internet blackout" on Tuesday.

Prime Minister Najib Razak, facing mounting pressure ahead of looming elections, said on Twitter that he had asked the cabinet to discuss the controversial new section of the Evidence Act.

"Whatever we do we must put people first," he tweeted late Tuesday. NGOs, bloggers and opposition politicians staged the protest earlier in the day by replacing their homepages with black screens featuring messages attacking the amendment, which went into effect in April despite widespread opposition.

Critics say under the amendment any web host, provider of a WiFi network, or ordinary user of a computer or mobile device can be found liable for any defamatory or harmful content sent via its systems.

Activists have called it an attempt by the ruling coalition government, which has been in power for more than five decades, to clamp down on the Internet.

Najib, who recently pledged to uphold a promise not to curb the web, must call elections by next year against a formidable opposition that gets most of its message out via the Internet due to a government stranglehold on traditional media.

The government promised in the 1990s not to censor the Internet in a bid to draw in foreign high-tech investment, although authorities are accused of blocking some sites.

The protest effort has been spearheaded by Malaysia's Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), which calls the amendment "a bad law passed in haste and does not take into account public interest and participation".

The CIJ and other critics, which have included some figures in the ruling coalition, have called for it to be scrapped or revised. The 24-hour blackout was to last until midnight.

Users attempting to access Paultan.org, a highly popular automotive-themed blog, were greeted with a black pop-up screen early Tuesday that said "This is what the web could look like" under the legal change.

Malaysia has long been known for its authoritarian rule but Najib, who came to power in 2009, has launched a campaign to repeal some repressive laws to gain voter support.

However, the opposition and rights groups have dismissed the drive as a sham, saying that various laws introduced to

replace the previous legislation have been little better than the old statutes.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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