

Thai agency defends mass cyber surveillance

Country's tradition is that criticism of monarchy is simply not allowed

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THAILAND should not be compared with other countries, says Mr Takorn Tantasith, secretary-general of its powerful National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC).

Defending the agency's controversial mass Internet surveillance aimed at stamping out criticism of Thailand's monarchy, Mr Takorn said in an inter-

view: "We want to clear everything up. The feelings of people towards kings and monarchies are different from one country to another."

"In Thailand, we love the King so much that we regard His Majesty as the soul of the nation... We do not criticise the King. This is the tradition, the norm and the culture of Thailand."

The NBTC is the licensing authority for broadcast-ers and Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

The royalist military regime has been taking a harder line. Last month, it impeached former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, and summoned at least three former Cabinet members for a dressing down over their comments. It also barred her from going overseas ahead of a criminal charge over a botched and allegedly corrupt rice purchase scheme that has cost the state billions of baht.

Last Saturday, the authorities seized banners sati-

rising the regime from university students in Bangkok. Today, its hand-picked national legislative assembly is due to vote on a measure that would give the army powers to detain anyone for up to 84 days with no judicial oversight. The move has led the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to express concern.

A man was arrested last week for faking a royal statement, shared on social media, that said King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 87 and in frail health, had appointed a regent. In private, many Thais are anxious about the royal succession.

On Tuesday, police said they had "dismantled an anti-monarchy network" and arrested the alleged ringleader in Bangkok.

Thailand's Article 112 and the Computer Crimes Act are the regime's key legal weapons. Article 112 - commonly called the lese majeste law - specifies up



NBTC secretary-general Takorn Tantasith says Thailand is different from other countries. ST PHOTO: NIRMAL GHOSH

to 15 years' jail for anyone found guilty of insulting the King, Queen, Crown Prince or Regent. Cases under Article 112 are on the rise, analysts say. The law in effect kills all public debate and discussion on the monarchy.

Mr Takorn said the NBTC has asked Facebook, YouTube and Line to remove content critical of the Thai monarchy. He acknowledged there could be technical difficulties, and that other countries may not have comparable laws.

While "groups of people" criticising the monarchy are a small minority, Mr Takorn said their views are amplified by social media, spread quickly online and "make people think it is a big deal".

Warring groups were trying to drag the monarchy into politics, he insisted. Some 200 websites were shut down in November and December. There have been fewer cases this year, he added.

Asked about balancing censorship with expectations of free speech, he said: "Freedom still exists, even within the scope of martial law. We look at only two main issues - criticism of the monarch, and threat to national security."

The government must protect the monarchy, he said, adding: "We need to follow the law, and the law says protect the King."

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Minister ordered to clarify boycott call

KUALA LUMPUR - Malaysia's Cabinet has ordered Agriculture Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob to issue an official clarification on his recent call for Malay consumers to boycott Chinese traders.

The order was announced by Transport Minister and Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) president Liow Tiong Lai, who vowed to fight for justice for the Chinese community last week, Malaysian news website Malaysiakini reported yesterday.

According to a statement in Chinese on his Facebook page, Mr Liow said he had informed the Cabinet of the party's position on the controversy, and that the MCA has also demanded that Datuk Seri Ismail retract his statement.

"We also asked that the Cabinet put (our demands) on record," he said. He added that he had "clearly" informed the Cabinet that Mr Ismail's statement had caused deep-seated dissatisfaction among the Chinese community. "We have urged Cabinet to swiftly resolve this issue to prevent it from festering," he said.

Mr Ismail confirmed the instruction yesterday evening. "Yes, I will explain. Wait for the explanation," he said in a text message to Malaysiakini, translated here.

On Feb 2, Mr Ismail's Facebook post urging Malays to boycott Chinese businesses went viral and drew flak from his Barisan Nasional (BN) colleagues. MCA is the leading Chinese party in the ruling BN coalition in Malaysia.

Although the MCA has demanded that Mr Ismail apologise and retract the remark, he has refused to do so. Last Thursday, the Prime Minister's Office also cleared him of racism charges, stating that his comments were not aimed at any ethnic group, but at businesses which refused to lower prices.

'Virginity test' plan for students dropped

JAKARTA - High-school girls in an Indonesian district will not be subjected to virginity tests in order to graduate, after a lawmaker sparked an outcry by proposing the move.

Mr Kusen Andalas, deputy head of the district, insisted that the proposal would not go ahead, saying: "I don't think it is ethical to carry out such tests, it is against people's rights."

His comments were in response to a proposal last week by an MP in the Jember local Parliament of Java to impose "good conduct" regulation, forcing female students to pass a virginity test to graduate from high school.

He had argued that this would tackle pre-marital sex in Indonesia, which has the world's biggest Muslim population.

But outrage from rights groups and the Islamic authorities alike prompted officials to distance themselves from the plan.

Human Rights Watch deputy director for Asia, Mr Phelim Kine, described the proposal as "appalling", adding: "The government's tolerance for this violence against women and girls needs to end."

The issue of virginity tests has caused controversy in Indonesia before. In 2013, the education chief of a city on western Sumatra island suggested that schoolgirls should undergo virginity tests to enter senior high school while the police faced criticism last year when it was revealed that female applicants to the force were subjected to such examinations.

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