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## Lift the Voice TV gag order

**T**he broadcasting regulator's complete shutdown of Voice TV, and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's continued exploitation of free airtime to promote himself in the lead-up to the upcoming general election are both highly unethical and unjustified.

Founded by Panthongtae Shinawatra, son of deposed prime minister Thaksin, Voice TV is seen as a pro-Thaksin, anti-regime broadcaster.

Thus, it has become a convenient target of state suppression since the military regime ousted the government of Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, in May 2014.

Since the coup, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) has repeatedly punished Voice TV for its programme content. To date, the commission has ordered Voice TV to partially suspend specific programmes 17 times, and last year the regulator ordered a full shutdown for seven days.

Early this week, the regulator handed down a new gag order to take the broadcaster off the air for 15 days, starting on Wednesday.

To justify its action, the NBTC repeated the same old reasons it used for its previous acts of bullying against Voice TV.

This time, it says two of Voice TV's programmes had aired content that may cause confusion, incite conflicts and promote divisions in the country.

In fact, the broadcaster was merely providing airtime for the Thaksin-linked Pheu Thai Party's key members to criticise the government, its acts of intimidation against the party, and its handling of the election and the economy. It has also facilitated debates on election-related matters that could have upset the regime.

The NBTC's rationale for the closure is absurd and nonsensical. It claims the content violates Section 37 of the Broadcasting and Television Businesses Act, which bars the airing of content deemed a threat to national security. It also cites an order of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) that prohibits "dishonest" criticism of the NCPO.

Voice TV's contents are actually similar to those aired or published by other mainstream media outlets, which have not been slapped with gag orders. As such, the NBTC's shutdown of Voice TV is an act of discrimination.

Voice TV may be politically partisan — but other state-controlled broadcasters are also biased towards the NCPO. Audiences can use their own judgement without the need for state censorship.

While the anti-regime broadcaster is taken off the air, Gen Prayut's weekly televised programme is still being broadcast, likely until the election. As a prime ministerial candidate of the Palang Pracharath Party, Gen Prayut should have quit his talk show — broadcast via all the TV pool channels every Friday evening since 2014 — and which has mainly aired the regime's propaganda as well as his own views. He should also quit the top job and assume a caretaker role.

Instead, he continues to exploit the free airtime, insisting the show is "not electioneering". But for many people, it is an obvious PR machine.

By keeping both the job and his talk show, Gen Prayut risks violating the election law which bars political post holders like himself from taking part in election campaigns and using state resources in favour of any party.

Taking Voice TV off the air is not just outright suppression of press freedom but also unjustified censorship in the lead-up to the election. To ensure a fair and free media environment in the run-up to the poll, the NBTC must lift the shutdown of Voice TV, and the prime minister must take his talk show off the air.