In wake of Mumbai bombing

India increases its censorship of the Internet

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An Indian government order to Internet service providers (ISPs) to block 17 Internet web sites and web pages resulted in Indians being denied access for well over a week to whole swathes of the Internet, including the blogs hosted on blogspot.com, typepad.com and Geocities.

In the face of a public outcry, the United Progressive Alliance government is now trying to shift blame for the lengthy disruption of Internet service onto the country's service providers, saying it was they who chose to deny access to domains and blog-hosts, rather than explicitly targeting the 17 sites that the government had named in its order, because this was technically far easier and far cheaper to do.

The truth, however, is otherwise: the Indian government has given itself broad powers to censor the Internet and two days after the July 11 Mumbai bombings used these powers in a completely arbitrary and undemocratic manner, issuing secret orders to Internet providers to block certain sites and pages, then refusing to publicly reveal which sites it had banned or explain why it had ordered them blocked.

Only after the passing of a more than a week and much public pressure did the government issue a second order to the ISPs, stipulating that they should block only the sites named in its first order.

Government claims that the denial of access to much of the Internet was an unexpected consequence of the ISPs trying to do its bidding at the least cost to themselves are contradicted by a senior official in the Information Technology Ministry, who said, "Indian ISPs don't have the technology to block individual name servers—say, a particular blog hosted on Blogspot. So they had no choice but to block the root servers of major blogging networks—Blogspot, Geocities and Typepad."

No less importantly, the Department of Telecommunications order against the 17 sites and web pages stands and the government continues to refuse to explain its actions, apart from suggesting that the ban was issued to thwart communalist agitation in the wake of the Mumbai bomb blasts.

Indian authorities have not laid any charges in the bombings, which killed more than 180 people and injured some 700, but they have said they believe the attack was carried out by operatives of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a movement opposed to Indian control of Kashmir, and the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and was facilitated by Pakistan.

Although this is reportedly the first time the Indian government has targeted blogs (on-line journals), a rapidly expanding and popular source of information and opinion, New Delhi regularly orders web sites blocked or banned. One media estimate places the number of banned sites in recent years, not including those that were the target of this month's ban, at almost 60. For a time during the 1999 Kargil war, India ordered the online edition of the liberal Pakistani daily *Dawn* blocked. The Yahoo newsgroup of the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), a separatist-exclusivist group in the northeastern state of Meghalaya, was banned in September 2003.

Under the Information Technology Act of 2000 and a federal government notification of July 2003, the Indian government has arrogated the power to ban web sites that it deems are harming the "sovereignty or integrity of India," the "security of the state," "friendly relations with foreign states and public order" or that are inciting people to commit a criminal offence.

An important role in policing the Internet is being played by the little-known Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN), the Indian branch of an

international global cyber-security network.

Shivam Raj, a blogger and freelance journalist, told the *Asian Times Online*, "Although CERT-IN is meant to be primarily concerned with Internet security, it often oversees 'censorship' under a legal clause that seeks to ensure 'balanced flow of information'."

As the government failed to inform the public of its ban on the 17 web sites and pages, let alone explain the reasons for their banning, knowledge of what had happened only came to light when tens of thousands of blog-writers and their readers found themselves unable to access their personal or favorite blogs.

According to the *Business Standard* "At the last count, over 42,000 bloggers on the Google-owned domain http://blogspot.com called themselves 'Indian.' Typepad.com, another popular blog-hosting domain, had over 7,000 Indians on its site. And the Yahoo!-owned geocities.com hosts over one lakh [100,000] Indian homepages. These three domains normally draw 10 million Indian eyeballs per day."

Outraged blog-writers, their readers and others concerned about civil liberties demanded the government explain why it was disrupting the Internet. Said cyber-law expert, Praveen Dalal: "[The] government decision could be in violation of provisions in the Indian constitution that upholds the fundamental right to free speech and expression, if it is found to be arbitrary, unreasonable and unfair."

The government's attempt to shift the onus onto the ISPs for what amounted to a blanket ban on many, if not most, of the country's most popular blog-sites is a patent attempt to cover-up its own indifference and hostility to basic democratic rights. In India, no less than the rest of the world, the Internet has emerged as a vital means of popular communication and discourse.

No less egregious is the continuing ban on the 17 web sites—a ban whose motivation and legal basis Indian authorities refuse to discuss.

According to media reports, the sites and blogs that have been banned are an odd mix. Two expound Hindu chauvinist views; other are addressed to Muslims. Several more, including Exposingtheleft.blogspot.com, are described by Reuters as containing "conservative American commentaries on the Middle East and the 'war on terror,' of a kind unlikely to stand out from thousands of others on the Internet." Another, a personal journal rarely updated since 2004, appears to have little if any commentary pertaining to India or South Asia.

The UPA government's dramatic assertion of the Indian state's powers to censor the Internet comes at a time when it is under heavy pressure from the corporate media and the Bhratiya Janata Party, Shiv Sena and their Hindu supremacist allies to increase the size and powers of the security forces in the name of fighting terrorism.

No quarter should be given to the government's attempt to justify the suppression of web sites and web pages in the name of preventing the stoking of communal antagonisms. In India it is a crime to promote violence against any group.

Moreover, India's national-security establishment and the UPA government have themselves contributed to the stoking of anti-Muslim sentiment in India, with their rush to proclaim Islamicist organizations as the targets of their bombing investigation and their accusations that Pakistan shares responsibility for the Mumbai atrocity.

While the Congress, the dominant force in the UPA, has historically opposed the Hindu supremacists' call for India to be declared a Hindu *rashtra* or Hindu state, it has a long history of both conniving with communalist forces—Narayan Rane, the former Shiv Sena Chief Minister of Maharashtra was recently welcomed into the Congress leadership—and of using the fight against the Hindu chauvinist right to justify antidemocratic measures whose principal target is the working class (Indira Gandhi's Emergency.)