

Social media giants work with Indian government to censor Internet

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, working in conjunction with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Internet technology companies, is intensifying its censorship of selected websites and social media accounts.

According to recent data, 1,329 social media URLs were blocked on the recommendations of a government committee dealing with "objectionable content" during the first 11 months of 2017. That was an almost 38 percent increase on the 964 URLs blocked or removed for the whole of 2016. In 2014, 10 URLs were blocked, followed by 287 in 2015.

Attempting to justify the censorship, an internal note from India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, declared: "While social media sites are a good medium to share and exchange information, some miscreants are also using this platform to spread rumours and posting objectionable content thereby causing disturbance in the society."

Elected in 2014, Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government has implemented pro-investor economic "reforms," including privatising public sector enterprises, slashing subsidies and further opening sectors of the economy to foreign investors.

To divert the growing opposition to its big business policies, the Modi government is whipping up Hindu communalism and ultra-right chauvinist elements to be used against the working class in general, and its political opponents in particular. Extreme-right Hindu fundamentalists have been mobilised to intimidate or silence anti-government sentiment among university students.

The ministerial note's reference to "causing disturbance in the society," indicates that New Delhi is acutely nervous about the mounting dissent and any

exposure of its promotion of Hindu communalism and complicity in the communal violence.

Facebook and other social media giants are fully cooperating with the government's censorship demands. According to Facebook's latest "Government Requests Report," the government made 9,853 requests for data in the first half of 2017, a more than 30 percent increase from the 6,324 requests in the first half of 2016.

The company admitted restricting access to 1,228 pieces of content "in response to legal requests from law enforcement agencies and the India Computer Emergency Response Team within the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology" during that time.

Facebook claimed that "the majority of content restricted was alleged to violate local laws relating to defamation of religion and hate speech." But how far Facebook jumps to the government's political demands is indicated in the following:

* On September 26, 2017, Facebook blocked the account of journalist Mohammad Anas for 30 days after he shared a photograph of a trader's cash memo with a message at the bottom that read: "It was our mistake to vote for the lotus [BJP's symbol]." The post had been widely commented on and shared, another indication of the opposition to the government.

* The next day, the "Humans of Hindutva" Facebook page, which shares satirical posts criticising the government, was blocked.

* Facebook suspended the account of graphic designer and documentary film-maker Gautam Benegal in September after he shared someone else's post, entitled: "Ways to identify a Hindutva [ideology of far-right Hindu extremism] sympathizer." The post criticised the BJP's promotion of Hindu extremism.

Twitter also has admitted receiving numerous requests from the government “asking it to block over 100 accounts and tweets that have been found ‘propagating objectionable content’.”

Most of these accounts were maintained by journalists, human rights activists and seemingly unaffiliated individuals. They included political criticism, and video and photographic exposures of government repression in Kashmir, the country’s only Muslim-majority state.

India’s Internet censorship is carried out via the Information Technology Act (ITA), passed in 2000. Section 69A is entitled “power to issue directions for blocking for public access of any information through any computer resource.” Under the legislation the government can censor the Internet “in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public order.”

Under ITA amendments passed in 2011, Internet companies must remove content deemed “objectionable” within 36 hours of being notified by authorities. Internet café owners must photograph their customers, keep copies of client IDs and browsing histories for one year, and forward this data each month to the government.

Modi’s government has transformed India into a frontline state in Washington’s drive to militarily and diplomatically encircle and prepare for war against China. Military and intelligence ties have been strengthened with Washington. Workers, youths and rural toilers widely oppose this shift, which poses the danger of nuclear war. The government’s escalating censorship and other attacks on democratic rights seeks to suppress anti-war opposition.

Indian governments also frequently shut down public access to the Internet in parts of the country. According to *internetshutdown.in*, which tracks these closures, authorities cut off Internet access 70 times last year, more than double the number from 2016. Jammu & Kashmir state was subjected to the largest number of shutdowns.

These measures are part of growing attacks on democratic rights, free speech and Internet access by governments around the world.

Last July, the *World Socialist Web Site* revealed that Google had changed its search algorithms in order to

block out left-wing, anti-war, and progressive websites.

The only way to fight Internet censorship is to mobilise the international working class. The WSWS has called for an international coalition of socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive websites, organizations and activists to take up this struggle. India’s censorship underscores the urgency of developing this campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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