

Papua New Guinea government plans to block access to Facebook

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The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government declared on May 29 it will ban Facebook use for a month to give authorities time to analyse the social network for “fake” profiles and “illegal” usage.

Communications Minister Sam Basil told the *PNG Post-Courier*: “The time will allow information to be collected to identify users that hide behind fake accounts, users that upload pornographic images, users that post false and misleading information on Facebook to be filtered and removed.”

A start date is yet to be announced. Basil later told parliament he disputed the newspaper’s report about an impending ban. He said the government’s official position would be made known after studies into “the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook.” Nevertheless, Basil declared he was “not afraid to put an indefinite ban” on the networking site.

The *Post-Courier* defended its report. Meanwhile, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported on May 29 that the PNG government intends to use its investigation to work out how to apply a restrictive “cyber-crime law” to social media more widely.

The move coincides with a decision to disconnect mobile phone sim cards that are not registered to users with formal identification. Basil told the ABC the disconnection would stop people using telecommunications and social media anonymously, claiming false accounts are used to “spread fake news and rumours.”

Basil previously said US Senate hearings on Facebook and a class action lawsuit against Cambridge Analytica and other companies over misuse of data raised concerns “for Papua New Guinea citizens.” Last month he commissioned a study of Facebook’s “impact” and the security of users’ personal information. He claimed “a lot of people” are receiving

“threats,” “fake news” and “defamatory statements” from unknown accounts.

The purported concern for ordinary citizens is bogus. Over the past two years, the unpopular government led by Prime Minister Peter O’Neill has turned to increasingly authoritarian measures to suppress discontent among the working class and rural poor over austerity measures. Military-police operations have suppressed student protests and strikes. Soldiers have been deployed to break blockades of major gas projects in the Highlands by local landowners over a range of grievances.

Speaking to the ABC, Basil flatly denied that the Facebook ban was an attempt to restrict freedom of speech. However, he insisted that while politicians are legitimately open to criticism, “whenever there is criticism we must ensure that it is factual” and opponents “must have alternatives if they are criticising a government policy.”

Basil suggested the creation of a government-sponsored alternative to Facebook. “If there need be, then we can gather our local applications developers to create a site that is more conducive for Papua New Guineans to communicate within the country and abroad as well,” he told the *Post-Courier*.

Just under 10 percent of PNG’s eight million people have access to the Internet, one of the lowest rates in the world. Even so, Facebook has become a popular place to discuss politics, especially among young people. Many use the site to criticise the government and expose corruption. Tens of thousands have accessed *World Socialist Web Site* articles and hundreds follow the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) Facebook page.

Facebook, which has more than two billion users, is facing mounting pressure from governments globally.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal has been used to intensify the push to censor the Internet and silence opposition to official politics.

In Indonesia, Communications and Information Minister Rudiantara last month issued Facebook with demands for information related to Cambridge Analytica and the security of users' data. In Sri Lanka, authorities blocked access to 5.5 million Facebook accounts following incidents of communal violence in March, which the government claimed had been incited on social media. China and North Korea have enacted partial or total blocks of Facebook.

In response to Basil's announcement, a Facebook spokesman said: "We have reached out to the Papua New Guinea government to understand their concerns." This is a signal that the tech giant is ready to impose official demands and use the PNG ban to further its own program of Internet censorship.

The crackdown, which comes as PNG prepares to host the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit, has been met with a chorus of criticism. One person told the *Post Courier* it was "a total violation of civil rights" and an attempt to "gag people" during the APEC meetings. The PNG government intends to use the summit to promote more investment from multinational mining and other companies to exploit the country's low-paid workforce.

Alarmed about the effects on business, Institute of National Affairs Director Paul Barker declared it a "travesty" to close down Facebook during APEC. He stated: "It would be both an attack on embracing technology, undermining the information era and mechanisms for accountability, but also damaging business and welfare."

Activists and civil society groups spoke out. Transparency International chairman Lawrence Stephens said stopping Facebook for a month sounded "pretty authoritarian and pretty worrying."

The most forceful criticism is coming from ordinary social media users. Jerry Kuri Mori wrote on May 29 in the "PNG Development Forum" Facebook group: "This government violates the very founding principles of our democracy which allows for the freedom of speech and expression ... This is an illegitimate government who claims to represent the voices of our people and yet constantly violates the very democratic ideals of our national constitution."

Abraham Ropa wrote on May 30 in the "PNG Anti-Corruption Movement" group: "Is [the ban] of fake accounts/user names and pornography or because people are revealing and publicising every truth about the corrupt deals about PNG government?"

In the group "PNG Happenings Today," which has more than 136,000 members, Thomas Tom Kolye wrote on May 30: "1. What damage has Facebook made to PNG? 2. Is Facebook a threat to any human? PNG need improvement in Internet services and not [the] shutting down Facebook."

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