Solomon Islands government to ban Facebook

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The government of the Solomon Islands in the south west Pacific has announced it will move to ban Facebook. The cabinet is also looking at banning the Messenger app.

Communications Minister Peter Shanel Agovaka confirmed the decision to *Solomon Times Online*, blaming public misuse of the social media platform. "Abusive languages against ministers, prime minister, character assassination, defamation of character—all these are issues of concern," he said.

It is not yet clear when the proposed ban might be implemented, for how long, or how the government intends to enforce it, but according to Agovaka the decision would not necessarily require parliament's approval. "The government is still in discussion with the operators to work out how this can be done. The operators shall need to establish a firewall to block Facebook," he declared.

Avoka falsely denied the ban is an attack on freedom of expression, claiming that freedom of the press is protected. He said the country lacks legislation on internet usage and cybercrime and cited purported concerns about what children were accessing. The internet needed to be regulated "to safeguard our young people from harmful content," he said.

Facebook has 2.4 billion users globally. In the Pacific it is a primary means of communication and used as a forum for public discussion as well as connecting expatriates with families at home. About 20 percent of the Solomon Islands' 650,000 population has internet access. A Solomon Islands Media Association spokesperson Georgina Kekea told Radio NZ the body was concerned people's voices were being suppressed and the ban contravened their constitutional rights.

Transparency International's Ruth Liloqula said the government was responding to adverse reactions to its COVID-19 economic stimulus package. "A lot of people are really pressing the government to make an explanation why some constituencies are getting $3 million and why some are just getting $600 and why the economic stimulus package has to go through members of parliament at all," she told Radio NZ.

The chamber of commerce said the ban was a threat to many businesses and would bring negative press on the world stage.

The Solomon Islands joins four other countries, China, Iran, Syria and North Korea, in banning Facebook. Exploding social struggles are driving governments internationally to impose internet censorship and attack freedom of speech and other basic democratic rights.

Spain's Socialist Party-Podemos government last month introduced measures to allow the state to monitor and suppress internet content under the pretext of combating "fake news" and "foreign intervention." New Zealand has also passed legislation making it easier for the government to "take down" content from social media that is deemed to be "extremist."

Social media platforms, including Facebook, are also actively involved in their own political censorship, targeting left-wing organisations and the *World Socialist Web Site* in particular, all in the name of halting the spread of disinformation and "fake news." Various methods have been used, including the manipulation of search results to downgrade or block particular websites.

In the Solomon Islands, Facebook was cited as a factor in riots and looting in the capital, Honiara, in April 2019 following a protest at the parliament over Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's re-election for a sixth term. Facebook was widely used by those organising the protests over deepening inequality and poverty.

Like other privileged political elites in the region, the Solomon Islands establishment is embroiled in corruption scandals and instability. Two by-elections

were forced last week after the courts found their respective former MPs guilty of bribing voters during the 2019 national election. Although both were disqualified from the by-elections, their spouses stood. One, Ethel Vokia, was successful in Northeast Guadalcanal while two former prime ministers, Derek Sikua and Gordon Darcy Lilo, were defeated.

The Facebook ban is, significantly, taking place amid rising tensions over the Sogavare government's relations with China. The leader of the Malaita province, Daniel Suidani, is threatening a separatist split after the national government's diplomatic switch last year from Taiwan to Beijing.

The proposed split by the country's most populous province follows a series of provocations by the regional premier, who is backed by US and Australian imperialism. Suidani has organised pro-Taiwan demonstrations and fomented anti-Chinese sentiment. His administration has effectively sought to maintain its own foreign policy, coordinating aid and economic assistance from Taipei. Suidani seized on the Facebook ban to further criticise the central government, saying it was "not the answer to people's frustrations."

Between 1999 and 2003, a low-intensity civil war involving the separatist Malaita Eagle Force militia cost around 200 lives and forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes. The threat of renewed conflict has been stoked by the United States, as part of its aggressive drive to undermine China's influence in the Pacific.

Class struggles are also erupting. Sogavare suspended the Solomon Islands Nurses Association (SINA) early this month for staging an "illegal" rally. Hundreds of nurses had gathered in the carpark of the National Referral Hospital in Honiara to protest non-payment of allowances for work done during the COVID-19 emergency. After failing to get a reply to a formal request to hold the demonstration, the nurses went ahead with the strike, against opposition by the SINA executive.

Sogavare claimed the SINA suspension was because the nurses' actions put lives at risk. "It is important that we follow the regulations, especially when there is a State of Public Emergency," he declared. Sogavare further warned the unions against becoming "an instrument of division instead of unity."

The Solomon Islands is not the only Pacific country to suppress Facebook. In July, the Samoan government threatened a ban after blogger Malele Paulo, also known as King Faipopo, was jailed for seven weeks for making false statements on social media allegedly defaming Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi. Similar measures have also been threatened or implemented by Nauru in 2015, Papua New Guinea (2018) and Tonga (2019).

The turn to authoritarian measures is escalating as the deeply impoverished countries face mounting economic and social crises. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Pacific economies were extremely fragile due to a colonial legacy of poverty and underdevelopment. Now governments in the region, many unstable and in crisis, are imposing tough new controls on the pretext of fighting the pandemic.

The International Labour Organisation has reported that thousands of jobs in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga are dependent on tourist visitor numbers, which have fallen to zero. Australian academic Stephen Howes forecasts that the shutting down of global trade will result in crises of food, water and medicine in the short term, and unemployment and poverty in the longer term, throughout the region.

Preparations to suppress widespread social unrest are well under way. Civil society organisation Civicus last December singled out Fiji, Nauru and Papua New Guinea as having "obstructed" basic civil rights, including media censorship. The Melanesia Media Freedom Forum warned after its annual meeting in Brisbane last year that threats to the media across the Pacific are increasing with "restrictive legislation, intimidation, political threats, legal threats and prosecutions, assaults and police and military brutality and illegal detention."

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