

Chinese regime further suppresses internet freedom of speech

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On January 8, the Cyberspace Administration of China published a new Draft Revision to its “Measures on the Administration of Internet Information Services” and further suppressed freedom of speech on the internet by prohibiting individual news bloggers from commenting and reporting on political developments.

The original document, “Measures on the Administration of Internet Information Services,” was published on September 25, 2020. The original measures were made to “regulate Internet information services activity and to promote the healthy and orderly development of Internet information services”. Significantly, in the new draft revision, the phrase “preserving national security and public interests” was added.

There are a number of other notable additions in the new draft, including:

- * The state will take measures to monitor and address illegal and criminal activities using domestic or foreign internet resources that would “harm the security or order of the nation's cyberspace or infringe on citizens' lawful rights and interests.”

- * All organizations and individuals are required to provide personal identification information when they arrange or use internet services, including for internet access, internet information services, domain name registration and resolution.

- * Mobile phone SIM cards and network adaptors must not be resold by any organization or individual. These cards are to be connected with their buyer's personal ID, and most websites and applications require a valid phone number during registration. Thus, prohibiting the resale of these cards allows the state to track an individual's online and offline activities.

- * The state, “in accordance with the law”, can take technological and other measures to block information

published outside of China that are “prohibited by laws and regulations”.

- * Individuals and organizations are not allowed to help others acquire and spread information that is blocked by the state.

These additional clauses explicitly justify the state's internet surveillance and censorship and threaten any individuals who attempt to circumvent these restrictions with legal penalties. Anyone in violation of the measures could face detention of up to 15 days and fines up to 100,000 RMB (\$14,285).

Previously, the state denied the existence of the so-called Great Firewall, which blocks access to a number of foreign websites, including Google-based services, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. Access to the World Socialist Web Site is also blocked in China. However, in recent years, the regime has begun to acknowledge the Great Firewall and the draft revision is an attempt to legalize its existence. Reports of people being arrested for trying to circumvent the Great Firewall had already begun to emerge last year.

Another regulation was published on January 22 to further restrict press freedom. This new regulation, entitled “Regulations on bloggers providing information service”, was to be implemented on February 22. This regulation requires all bloggers who publish or write about the news to apply for a licence from the Cyberspace Administration.

Days before the new regulation was to be implemented, many news bloggers have received a notice, which advised them not to write or publish any commentaries on political, economic, military and diplomatic developments if they do not have a licence. It warned that publication without a licence could constitute a violation of relevant laws and regulations, and might bring “inconvenience” when publishing their

materials in the future.

The Cyberspace Administration held a meeting a week after the new regulation was published, emphasizing that it would strengthen it further to address “prominent issues that have disrupted the rules of communication over the internet” among bloggers (especially those run by individuals, not corporate media), “trending” pages on social media, push ads, and short-video platforms.

At the meeting, the Cyberspace Administration justified its anti-democratic measures aimed at strangling free expression on the ground it was necessary to provide internet users with a “correct orientation in political issues and public opinions” that would “inspire a fighting spirit”. It warned of tougher punishments for those gathering or reporting on the news “not in accordance with the new regulation”—that is, writing about and commenting on political developments without a licence.

One blogger who specializes in political commentary and has over 400,000 followers on Weibo social media confirmed that he had received the notice. “According to the current regulation, blogs run by individuals are not allowed to comment on political, economic and social issues. I have received a notice a few days ago, too. I have been following news on political events since I was eight and am only good at writing about [politics]. Now I really don’t know what I can post here.”

This new regulation was questioned and criticized widely, not just by bloggers. For instance, an ordinary Weibo user with only a hundred followers commented, “What crimes have news-reporting bloggers committed?”

The new measures are an attack on the democratic rights of the working class. Even though the bloggers affected span a wide range on the political spectrum, ultimately, the censorship is aimed at suppressing left-wing organizations and political opposition particularly from the working class.

Almost every year, new regulations have been implemented by the Chinese regime to impose tougher restrictions on information and communication over the internet. This is also not restricted to China in particular, but is an expression of the growth of authoritarianism and police state measures around the world.

China claimed last year to have eradicated absolute poverty in rural areas, but the social gulf between rich and poor has widened drastically over the past three decades. The new censorship measures are a response to rising social tensions produced by an economic slowdown that worsened amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Millions and millions of workers are confronted with declining wages, increasing work hours, and growing risks of unemployment. At the same time, the super-rich in China experienced a staggering increase in their wealth in 2020, which surpassed the increases of the past few years.

The ruling regime in China is terrified that the working class and the impoverished in rural areas could be radicalized by “unlicensed” political commentary that does not parrot the party line, shaking the seemingly strong, but actually weak, state apparatus that defends the interests of the super-rich by authoritarian means.



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