

Chinese government imposes new Internet censorship law

Will Morrow
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The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) passed legislation during the final session of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on December 28 to further strengthen the country's anti-democratic Internet censorship laws.

The "Decision on Strengthening the Protection of Online Information" is aimed at intimidating Internet users from posting or accessing "illegal" online information. The new law ties every web site and Internet connection user account to the identity of an individual. The main aim is to stifle online political discussion, particularly criticism of the government, and the use of social media to organise protests.

All telecommunications companies must now obtain the identity of new customers who register for landline, wireless or mobile phone Internet connections—so that activity from the account can be directly traced to the account holder. The law also applies to any Internet site, including popular "microblogging" sites like Sina Weibo, that allows users to post information. Previously, many people created accounts under pseudonyms to protect themselves from state persecution.

At the same time, these sites are required to delete "illegal" information published on them and provide all records, including the personal details of the alleged offender, to the government.

Beijing has intensively censored Internet usage since its introduction to the country. The so-called "Great Firewall" prevents users in China from accessing popular web sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The government also closely monitors online discussions and blocks the results of web searches from specific terms, including the names of some CCP officials.

Measures had previously been implemented to

minimise anonymous Internet usage. The three largest Internet companies already require correct identification for new account holders. In 2011, the government demanded that Sina Weibo, which is similar to the US-based Twitter, confirm the identity of users. The company, however, has not yet complied, partly out of commercial concerns. The new law is aimed at pressuring companies and all Internet sites to abide. It is also directed at mobile phone account holders—only 70 percent have their identities confirmed.

In addition, Internet users and companies that provide Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), as well as businesses that use VPNs to encrypt information, have reported their networks being shut down. The shutdowns reportedly began in September and intensified in the lead-up to the CCP's 18th Party Congress in November, but have continued. VPNs use data encryption and proxy servers located overseas to allow web surfers to circumvent site filters. The VPN provider Astrill published a message saying that an update to the "Great Firewall" gave China's Internet police the ability "to learn, discover and block VPN protocols automatically."

These measures appear to be part of a wider crackdown on public criticism, including from within factions of the regime itself, in the wake of the party congress. On January 4, the government shut down the web site of *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, a magazine published by so-called liberal sections of the CCP, after it published an article in response to the Internet censorship laws calling for political reform and criticising the government for failing to adhere to the country's constitution.

The same day, a group of 35 journalists in the *Southern Weekend* called for the resignation of a CCP official in Guangdong province who had reportedly

modified a New Year editorial that made similar criticisms.

The further tightening of censorship points to the acute sensitivity of the new leadership, installed at last year's congress, to growing social tensions as the Chinese economy slows under the impact of the worsening global economic crisis.

The CCP congress set out an economic program that will accelerate the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and open up new sectors of business to foreign corporations. These measures will further exacerbate class tensions as unemployment, poverty and social inequality rise.

The government fears that any public criticisms could become the focal point for the intervention of the working class and poor, based on their own social demands. Approximately 538 million people now use the Internet in China, more than the whole of Europe. Two micro-blogging sites each claim to have more than 300 million registered users—the overwhelming majority of them young.

The CCP is also aware of the role played by social networking sites during the revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. Beijing responded with extreme nervousness to calls on blogging sites for similar protests in China in 2011, sending uniformed and plain-clothed officers to prevent any demonstrations.

The factional differences within the regime are purely tactical. The so-called liberals call for very limited steps toward democratic reform to accompany pro-market restructuring, as a means of appealing to and creating a social base among sections of the emerging middle classes. All CCP factions are deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class.

International media outlets, including the *New York Times* and London-based *Financial Times*, have criticised the new law, as well as Beijing's Internet and media policies more generally. These same publications accept the inroads into democratic rights and legal norms being made in the US and Europe. Their criticisms are in line with the Obama administration's hypocritical invocation of human rights abuses in China as part of its broader diplomatic and strategic campaign to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia.

The new Internet crackdown indicates that the new Chinese leadership, headed by CCP general secretary

Xi Jinping, has no intention of offering even minor democratic concessions, but is strengthening the police-state apparatus in preparation for social convulsions ahead.



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