

# Papua New Guinea police “test” shuts down Facebook

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The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government recently admitted that police “successfully tested” placing a block on social media platforms, targeting Facebook in particular, for much of March 24.

Police Minister Peter Tsiamalili said the test was carried out under the framework of the Counter-Terrorism Act 2024, supposedly to address growing “concerns” over hate speech, misinformation and other “harmful content” online.

Tsiamalili did not specify what kind of technology was used. He claimed it was conducted in collaboration with the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC), the National Information and Communications Technology Authority (NICTA) and internet service providers.

“We are not attempting to suppress free speech or restrict our citizens from expressing their viewpoints,” Tsiamalili declared. “However, the unchecked proliferation of fake news, hate speech, pornography, child exploitation, and incitement to violence on platforms such as Facebook is unacceptable.”

Amid escalating social turmoil and anti-government opposition internationally, measures restricting access to digital media are being imposed by many governments to suppress basic democratic rights. PNG’s neighbour and former colonial ruler Australia has enacted anti-democratic “hate speech” laws and is imposing stringent social media restrictions on under 16 year-olds.

The wider Pacific region is a social tinderbox. A seven-months-long uprising by alienated Kanak youth in New Caledonia last year resulted in a brutal French police-military crackdown, 14 deaths and €2.2 billion in damage. Led by Australia, Pacific governments, including PNG, in December established a multi-national Pacific Policing Initiative, aimed to both push back against China’s influence and to act as a rapid deployment force to intervene against civil unrest.

PNG, the largest island nation in the Southwest Pacific

with a population of 10.7 million, has a mountainous geography coupled with poor infrastructure which makes internet usage critical for many people. A total of 3.74 million cellular mobile connections were active in 2023, equivalent to about 36 percent of the population. Facebook accounts for 61.5 percent of all social media use.

Government agencies responsible for communications, including NICTA, said they were not made aware of the police activity. “Public confidence in our digital governance relies on transparency and consistency in how we approach online regulation,” NICTA chief executive Kilakupa Gulo-Vui told the media.

Department of Information Communication and Technology Secretary Steven Matainaho also stated his department was not aware of the “test,” but pointed out that the police have powers under new domestic terrorism laws.

The Counter-Terrorism Act, ostensibly intended to curb tribal violence in conflict-torn areas of the isolated highlands, passed through parliament last November with unanimous support. Prime Minister James Marape boasted that the legislation, which created a raft of new provisions, penalties and funding to boost police, was “a monumental, milestone law.”

Michael Kabuni, a postgraduate student at the Australian National University and former lecturer at the University of PNG, told *Benar News* that the Facebook shutdown had exposed the “fundamental flaws” in the Act, namely “its unconstitutional overreach, its threat to civil liberties, and its potential for abuse under the guise of national security.”

Kabuni noted that the police commissioner had justified the “test” by referring to Section 16 of the Act, but this does not provide for shutting down any form of media. It only allows police to access information to aid investigations. No one could point to a specific provision

of the Act that enabled the shutdown “apart from loose references to the law,” Kabuni concluded.

The draconian Counter-Terrorism Act gives the government broad powers to monitor and restrict digital communications, including the ability to surveil online activity without judicial oversight. It also allows law enforcement to check vehicles or premises without warrants, and grants the attorney-general and police commissioner powers to authorise surveillance based on “reasonable suspicion.”

Kabuni noted that beyond the infringement on personal freedoms, “the Act institutionalizes state surveillance on an unprecedented scale in PNG.” It permits arrests and detention without a warrant based solely on suspicion of terrorism-related activities. Terrorism is defined broadly to encompass acts intended to advance “political, religious, or ideological causes,” he said.

In February, Police Commissioner David Manning bluntly threatened social media users allegedly spreading “false information” that they would be held “accountable.” Manning was responding to claims regarding police pay which he said caused “disharmony.” He warned those who “abuse online systems” that their days of spreading disinformation were “numbered.”

The Facebook shutdown was met with widespread outrage. Many users downloaded and shared Virtual Private Network (VPN) apps to continue posting. East Sepik Governor Allan Bird declared: “That was just a test, that was step one. There is no limit to the powers the Minister of Police can exercise under [the Counter-Terrorism Act].”

Authoritarian measures by the Pangu Pati-led government also involve forthcoming legislation to control the media. Communications Minister Timothy Masiu claims the Media Development Policy will “address the ongoing concerns about sensationalism, ethical standards, and the portrayal of violence in the media.” He declared: “We must be more responsible in how we report and portray the issues that matter most to our country. It’s time for Papua New Guinea’s media to evolve and reflect the values that truly define us.”

Transparency International PNG, Media Council of PNG and the Pacific Freedom Forum have all warned the policy will “limit journalists’ ability to report freely and impact the quality of public information.” University of the South Pacific’s journalism head Shailendra Singh told radio station RNZ Pacific the proposed law could be “the thin edge of the wedge of state media control,” as in Fiji where similar media laws have had a “chilling effect on

journalism.”

These anti-democratic measures are being advanced following major social unrest. In January 2024, Marape imposed a two-week state of emergency in the capital, Port Moresby, in response to widespread rioting. For 24 hours on January 10, simmering discontent driven by growing living costs erupted into chaos. Buildings and shops were looted and torched, and 22 deaths resulted. Calls for a nationwide strike were also raised.

While troops and armoured vehicles were deployed in the capital’s streets to suppress the protests, Masiu threatened to shut down social media sites alleging that users were “spreading fake news, misinformation and disinformation.”

PNG is one of the world’s most impoverished countries despite its extensive natural resources, which are plundered by transnational energy and mining corporations. The World Bank estimates that almost 40 percent of the population lives in poverty, with only 20.9 percent having access to electricity. Most live without consistent access to clean water. Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the fragile health system regularly faces collapse, its inadequate working conditions and low pay leading to protests and strikes by nurses and doctors.

A vast gulf separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses from the country’s corrupt and venal ruling elite. Trust in the political establishment has disintegrated following decades of growing inequality, buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures under successive governments.

General widely discredited elections of 2017 and 2022 were mired in bribery and corruption, ballot rigging and the wholesale omission of names from the roll.

Further eruptions of protest and class struggle are inevitable as the economic crisis deepens, driven by the global trade war being stoked by US imperialism—including 10 percent tariffs imposed by Trump on PNG. The PNG government and opposition agree that the burden of the crisis must be imposed on working people, which will entail deeper attacks on living standards and basic democratic rights.



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