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Groups hail removal of Internet censorship

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Various groups today welcomed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's decision to remove all forms of Internet censorship.

They said internet censorship was not the answer to combating social ills among youths, and would be counter productive instead of helping solve such problems.

Computer Industry Association of Malaysia or Pikom chairman Shaifulbahrim Salleh said Internet censorship should be practised by the individual, parents and even website owners, and not the Government through laws.

"The industry would encourage positive use of the Internet as much as possible because with greater use, there will be more business, more creativity and innovation, and more knowledge," he said.

On the removal of the need to register users at cybercafes, Shaifulbahrim said it was a good move because registration created an administrative nightmare for cybercafe owners.

"There are many other ways to monitor Internet usage, if that was needed. For example, cybercafes could run on a membership system," he said.

He also said creating a proper environment in cybercafes could help prevent unhealthy activities in such places.

"The authorities could also make cybercafe owners know they were being closely watched by conducting regular checks on their premises, especially those which have been the subject of many public complaints.

"On the other hand, local authorities could reward cybercafes which are exemplary in stemming out unhealthy activities," he added.

While able to see some merit in the requirement for cybercafes to register their customers, The Media Shoppe Sdn Bhd managing director Kevin Thong said the withdrawal of the registration requirement was good as owners would no longer need to force users to register.

"Some customers are dead against putting their names down and can get quite unpleasant," he said. The Media Shoppe owns four cybercafes.

Thong said the move to stop any censorship of the Internet was good as censorship would slow it down considerably.

"Censorship would surely deter people from using the Internet," he said.

The Malaysian Youth Council, in a Press release, said putting in place Internet censorship would give the world a wrong impression over the Government's promises contained in the Multimedia Super Corridor's Bill of Guarantees.

"MYC is worried that Internet censorship will directly cause the promotion of the MSC to fail," said Norizan Sharif, chairman of the MYC's Urban Development Committee.

Norizan urged all local authorities to be more careful when introducing regulations for Internet usage.

"MYC would like to call on the Subang Jaya Municipal Council to reconsider its smartcard which is supposedly capable of monitoring the websites which a user visits in the local council's hypermedia library.

"Such monitoring would make the local council a 'big brother', something which goes against the Government's promise that there will not be any Internet censorship," he said.

As for cybercafes, the MYC said the premises should be monitored rather

than the contents of the Internet.

"As such, MYC would like to urge the Housing and Local Government Ministry to immediately draw up cybercafe guidelines to placate the worries of parents," he said.

Cybercafes, Norizan said, should be seen as education and not entertainment centres, and local authorities, parents and community leaders should be able to distinguish between them and video-games arcades which was purely for entertainment.

"We had already forwarded to the Ministry a 20-point proposal on guidelines during a meeting between the MYC, Local Government Department and representatives of local councils, which included issues of licensing, classification, deposits, cybercafe activities, location, lighting and others," he said.

He also urged all cybercafe operators to be more responsible and take pro-active steps towards self regulation.

He said the MYC would be launching an "accepted user's policy" next week to assist cybercafe operators practice self-regulation.

Gerakan central committee member Dr S. Vijayaratnam said in a Press release that Dr Mahathir's statement should immediately silence critics of the Government, who were always complaining about censorship.

"If one takes a rational look at the history of the nation, the degree of censorship has been reduced since early times," he said.

Vijayaratnam said he believed Malaysians were mature enough to "take everything they see and read in its proper context" and could decide for themselves what was true or false, and substantive or factual.

The Government, he said, should effectively rebut all untrue accusations and misconceptions so that two sides of every story is presented.

"This calls for the establishment of a specialised Department with qualified experts to ensure immediate and meaningful responses."

Vijayaratnam said this was an important attitude to adopt to ensure the success of the MSC, where unrestricted access and utilisation of the information superhighway is vital.

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