

Cabinet rebuffs calls to scrap Section 114A

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By AFP

A minister said Thursday the government will not change a legal amendment that has drawn protests from critics who call it an attempt to stifle free expression on the Internet.

Prime Minister Najib Razak pledged earlier this month to review the measure after NGOs, bloggers and opposition parties staged a one-day "Internet blackout" protest, replacing their homepages with blackened screens.

Critics say that under the amendment to the Evidence Act any web host, wi-fi network provider, or ordinary user of a computer or mobile device can be punished for defamatory or harmful content sent via their systems.

It was passed in April.

De facto law minister Nazri Aziz said the cabinet discussed the issue in a meeting with Najib on Wednesday.

"The cabinet has decided that there is not going to be any change... We need this to ensure that we can effectively fight cybercrime," he told AFP.

But opponents have called it an assault on Internet freedom by the ruling coalition government that has been in power for more than five decades and say it unfairly punishes the wrong people.

Najib must call elections by next year and he faces a formidable political opposition that gets most of its message out via the Internet because of the government stranglehold on traditional media.

"It's definitely intended to be protecting the interests of the authorities, of the government," Tian Chua, a senior official with the opposition PKR, said of the amendment.

"To me, it seems to be very repressive."

The government promised in the 1990s not to censor the Internet in a bid to draw in foreign high-tech investment.

As a result, blogs that are often highly critical of the government have flourished along with independent news websites that provide an alternative to the pro-government coverage that dominates newspapers and other traditional media.

Najib has launched a drive to reform repressive laws to lure back voters who switched to the opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim in 2008 elections. Those polls saw the government lose its two-thirds majority.

But activists and opposition figures have dismissed the reform drive as insincere, pointing to the Evidence Act amendment and a law passed late last year that bans street protests.

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