Cambodia mimics China’s Great Firewall with new ‘Internet Gateway’

By Harry Baldock, Total Telecom
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All online traffic will be routed through Gateway, allowing the government to censor content

Yesterday, the Cambodian government announced that it would be adopting what it called the National Internet Gateway as a method of monitoring and controlling all the data flowing into the country.

Under the new policy, all local ISPs and telcos will be required to route traffic through the Gateway, where a central authority will take measures to “prevent and disconnect all network connections that affect national income, security, social order, morality, culture, traditions and customs.” Those accessing the internet will be required to identify themselves through online forms.

Companies that do not comply could see their bank accounts frozen and operating licences revoked.

The decree gave service providers one year to connect to the Gateway, but did not give a time frame for the launch of the programme itself.

Discussions around the creation of the Gateway, which bears distinct similarities to China’s Great Firewall, were first revealed back in August last year. At the time, the government claimed that the Gateway would be good for the operators, relieving
them of the need to operate their own connections to the international community and thus lowering their costs.

Big tech, however, in the form of the Asia Internet Coalition (AIC), were quick to voice their concerns, arguing that the move would pose “poses serious risks to business and Internet platforms”.

But of course, the real threat here is to free speech, privacy, and democracy. Cambodia is a de facto one-party state, with a ban on opposition and the government holding all the seats in Parliament.

Speaking to Reuters, Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, warned that the Gateway could be the beginning of the end for digital freedom in Cambodia.

“The last few years have seen a sharp increase in the number of citizens being threatened, harassed and even prosecuted for their use of the internet and for exercising their right to free speech,” said Chak.

Today on Twitter, Chak posted a joint statement calling for the decree to be discarded on the grounds of infringing on human rights, cosigned by a wide variety of domestic and international organisations.
Government spokesperson Phay Siphan has responded, somewhat bafflingly, by saying that the decree is less intrusive than regulations in the US and the UK.

Oppressive digital measures such as these are nothing new to Southeast Asia, with similar policies adopted to varying extents in neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Vietnam.

Of course the paradigm of internet censorship is China’s so-called Great Firewall, which keeps an iron grip on the content available to the country’s citizens. At a time when relations between Cambodia and the West are becoming more difficult, China remains a major economic partner for the Phnom Penh government. As a result, the new Biden administration in the US, alongside European leaders, will have to tread the diplomatic line carefully in this region to avoid pushing these countries further into China’s digital sphere of influence.

Details: https://www.totaltele.com/508699/Cambodia-mimics-Chinas-Great-Firewall-with-new-Internet-Gateway