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India drops plan to punish journalists for 'fake news' following outcry

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NEW DELHI (Reuters) - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday ordered the withdrawal of rules punishing journalists held to be responsible for distributing “fake news”, giving no reason for the change, less than 24 hours after the original announcement.

The move followed an outcry by journalists and opposition politicians that the rules represented an attack on the freedom of the press and an effort by Modi’s government to rein in free speech ahead of a general election due by next year. “The prime minister has directed that the press statement regarding fake news be withdrawn and the matter be addressed in the Press Council of India and the News Broadcasters Association,” a senior official in Modi’s office told Reuters.

Late on Monday, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry had said the government would cancel its accreditation of journalists who peddled “fake news”.

After Modi’s intervention, the ministry announced the withdrawal in a one-line statement. Media bodies welcomed the decision but cautioned the government against trying to control the media. “The government has no mandate to control the press,” said Gautam Lahiri, president of the Press Club of India, adding that the media were also worried about growing incidents of “fake news”.

“The Press Council is the right platform to deal with complaints regarding any fake news.”

Co-opted by U.S. President Donald Trump, the term “fake news” has quickly become part of the standard repertoire of leaders in authoritarian countries to describe media reports and organizations critical of them.

The events in India followed Malaysia’s approval this week of a law prescribing jail terms of up to six years for spreading fake news. Other countries in Southeast Asia, including Singapore and the Philippines, are considering how to tackle “fake news” but human rights activists fear laws against it could be used to stifle free speech.

India’s rules proposed to strip journalists guilty of writing or broadcasting “fake news” of their government accreditations, either for a limited time or permanently, depending on the frequency of infringements, the ministry said.

Such accreditation is required by journalists seeking to visit ministries and attend news conferences or government seminars. It also establishes their identity at other news events.

The ministry did not define “fake news”, but said it would refer complaints about it in print to the Press Council of India, with suspect cases on television going to the News Broadcasters Association.

India slipped three places last year to rank 136 among 180 countries rated in the world press freedom index of the watchdog Reporters Without Borders. The non-profit body said Hindu nationalists, on the rise since Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party swept to power in 2014, were “trying to purge all manifestations of anti-national thought”.

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